John Clow (Jun)

Blackhill of Airlie

Kirriemuir

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/thatfollowedafte0000jglo

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Novel

EAST ALL THE WAY

Books of the Sea

PERIL OF THE SEA

MYSTERIES OF THE SEA

STRANGE ADVENTURES OF THE SEA

A GREAT SEA MYSTERY

⌑

HERE ARE MYSTERIES

⌑

In collaboration

THE FEET OF THE YOUNG MEN

THAT FOLLOWED AFTER

J. G. LOCKHART

LONDON
ERNEST BENN LIMITED

First published in 1929

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

To
I. E. L.

CONTENTS

PART I. JANPLIN

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	EXPECTATION	11
II.	JANPLIN	35
III.	A PIECE OF MISS GILCHRIST'S MIND	43
IV.	PREPARATION	52
V.	THE MUTTER OF DRUMS	61
VI.	SUSPENSE	67
VII.	ARRIVAL	74
VIII.	"THE TOPMOST ROOF"	83
IX.	"AND ALL THAT SORT OF THING"	93
X.	THE NEWS	109

PART II. JANPLIN'S DAUGHTER

I.	JANPLIN'S CURE	121
II.	STAVROCK	127
III.	APPROACH	141
IV.	THE PACK	152
V.	HOME FROM THE HILL	164
VI.	STEWART SQUARE	173
VII.	BILL MINDS THE SHOP	182
VIII.	A BABE IN BLOOMSBURY	200
IX.	RENDEZVOUS	218
X.	PRISONERS	229
XI.	TREASURE ISLAND	249
XII.	RING OF RETURN	258
XIII.	MAN-HUNT	273
XIV.	"YOUR ENGLISH SUMMER'S DONE"	286

PART I

JANPLIN

CHAPTER I

EXPECTATION

(1)

In front stretched league upon league of snow-covered land, with little to break its flatness but an occasional dip and rise as gentle as the swell of the Channel on a quiet day; and here and there a few poplars, forlorn as the forgotten stragglers of an army, drooped beneath their white burdens. Although it was early afternoon the daylight was already waning, and in its sombre decline the snow lay dull and leaden, to match the gloom of the skies, so that on that near horizon you could scarcely tell where the one greyness ended and the other began. Overhead the sky sagged like a sodden blanket, laden with the promise of unshed snow.

The little train of camels—brown smudges on grey—crawled across this bleak landscape. There were seven of them—Bactrians, far gone in mange, so that their coats were as patched as ill-kept doormats. They were marching in single file, stepping delicately and with more than the habitual disdain of their kind; as though in vain protest at the fate which had condemned them to such a journey in such a land. Servants to the whim and madness of man, they could but obey. Grunt and roar as they might when their loads were hooked on at the start of a stage, in the end they would scramble to their feet and plod on—on across this strange sand that froze their feet and at times, treacherously elusive, sent them slithering forward so that they were hard put to it to keep their balance.

So they padded on, dejected, disgruntled, each following closely in his leader's tracks with long, uncertain strides that squelched through the soft snow, each testifying mutely to the folly of man his master.

On this last point four out of the five riders—there were two baggage camels—were in complete agreement. For a fortnight of discomfort and short rations they had been travelling east. There had been the journey through the mountain country of Khorasan, with perils of precipices and robbers and wintry weather; when a wind with a razor-edge had cut through tent and blanket and sheepskin coat; and when two of the camels had been lost—one by bumping its load against the cliffside, so that it was thrown over the precipice, the other through slipping in the melting snow, so that its ungainly legs had sprawled apart and it had ruptured itself beyond remedy. That had meant the jettison of precious rations, and the overloading of the remaining beasts. Then, painfully, they had stumbled down to the plain, past Merv, which they had skirted as an unhealthy neighbourhood frequented by predatory Tartars and stray Bolshevists; on to the great ford of the Oxus, where the camels had cut their legs against the swirling slivers of ice and the snow had so blanketed them round that once they had well-nigh floundered to death in the deeper waters.

And now, what lay in front? At least they knew their goal, the city of Sogdiana; and that achieved should mean at worst a respite from present hardship: at worst, and perhaps at best. There had been strange talk at the caravanserai where they had lain the previous night. It was said that trouble was at hand, that the Men from the North were coming back, that the streets of Sogdiana, like those of Bokhara the Noble, would soon be running with blood, and that its bazaars, the richest prize in Central Asia, would fall to the invaders. So much they had learnt

in whispers and hints, given with a glance over the shoulder, as though each man saw a spy in his neighbour. What profit was there in pushing on, if at the journey's end their throats were to be cut for their pains? Better, surely, to stay where they were—a return across the hills was an intolerable thought—better to wrap themselves in their blankets and, with eyes turned Meccawards, to find death quietly in sleep.

But *she* would never suffer such blessed resignation. When her trusted Lieutenant, Milteh the Druse, had fallen sick and been left behind at Meshed, they had thought that matters would mend and that thenceforth they would be able to do much as they pleased. But, merciful God, how wrong they had been! There was the affair of Farraz and Rasul, the two Arabs of the party, who had suddenly remembered an ancient blood feud. She had come between them with a whip, and they—too astonished to resist the indignity—had separated and never renewed their quarrel. Then there was the morning when they had agreed among themselves to go no further; and she had proclaimed in her quiet voice that unless the caravan started in ten minutes she would shoot Sarwat, the ringleader and head camelman. She had meant it too. She was mad, bewitched, a devil, but what she threatened, that she did. It was true that she paid princely wages, and cared for her people when they fell sick, and went to search for them when they were lost. But her lightest word was law to her hard-driven caravan. If she ordered them on to Sogdiana to Sogdiana they must go. Perhaps they would get there. Perhaps their throats would be cut. Perhaps they would lose themselves in this devil-haunted plain. Or perhaps, by the mercy of God, they would live to return to their own sunny lands. These issues were written in the Book of Fate, and one thing alone was known to them—that they were a little more afraid of the *Khanum* than they were of robbers or snow or

even of the Men from the North. Mad, utterly afflicted by Allah as she was, she must be obeyed.

Miss Janet Gilchrist of Cairns, Gold Medallist of the Royal Geographical Society, though well aware of the qualms of her retainers, had long ceased to be troubled by them. After all, by this time she had the men well in hand. Earlier in the journey, just after she had dumped poor Milteh at the American Mission at Meshed, there had been some nasty moments when her Arabs had shown signs of "freshness." Blind and dizzy with fever and quinine, she had had to call up all her strength to face those first threats of mutiny. She had met them with bold words, one hand firmly clutching a riding whip, the other in the deep pocket of her long coat, where her little revolver lay. Since then it had been easier to keep the men up to the mark. There was, of course, always the need each morning to bully them out of their blankets for the start, to see that they cared for the camels—and for themselves—and that they made a proper camp for the night. What children they were—as quick to elation as to despair, feckless, improvident, quarrelsome, yet generally responsive to right handling!

But at the moment Miss Gilchrist's mind was busy on other problems. First among these was the need to reach Sogdiana before the night—a need that nagged at her like an aching tooth. If the sky were a true prophet, more snow was coming; and if it caught them before their journey's end their plight would be critical. Her maps were a bad joke, and in a snowstorm such bearings as she had would disappear. If they were driven to make another camp in the open, they would hardly leave it alive. They were all dead beat, and she as weary as any of them, so that to fall asleep in that bitter cold, with no fuel for a fire and scarcely a square meal left in the *yakdans*, was to make terms with death. Yet Sogdiana could not be more than six or seven miles distant. She peered through her glasses across the plain, but could

see nothing. The visibility was shocking, but something surely should appear soon. If only she could check her line before the snow came down. . . .

The journey had begun, as most of her journeys began, in a vague, aimless way: a city to be seen here, some rubbings to be taken there, perhaps a little piece of new map to be made. But out of it a purpose had crystallised, hard and clear—Sogdiana and John Plinn.

It was partly that she had never seen Sogdiana, with its famous mosques and its almost more famous bazaars. Before the War, when the Russians were in occupation, English visitors had not been encouraged. Also, Sogdiana had been, as she put it, "out of her regular beat." But the Russians had disappeared with the Tsarist government, and the Emir had been dragged out of a dignified retreat to become the ruler in fact of the land he had long ruled in name. John Plinn had had a hand in that business, and she was curious to discover how this—his latest adventure—was working out.

Also, she did want to see John Plinn again, a desire which recurred in her life with the regularity of a decimal. She had known it first in days when she and he were a good deal younger; when she was making her first excursions into the life of the East, and he was already a name among the tribes of the Indian Frontier, from Quetta to Chitral. She had stayed with him in his big bungalow at Kohat, where his domestic staff was recruited from the worst characters of the Border, and he held informal Durbars, at which tribesmen who owned obedience to no man came to seek and take the rough justice of "Janplin." The friendship, so begun, had ripened; and two years later, when John, on one of his rare furloughs, had suddenly announced his intention of marrying Elizabeth Thorold, he had asked Janet with a laugh to attend the wedding as his best man.

Then Janet had wandered off to the Hauran, and

while she was there, news came that sent her back by the next steamer to England. Elizabeth was dead. Down at Stavrock Abbey, the Plinns' big Wiltshire home, she had borne John a baby daughter; and a few days later he was following his wife's coffin to the vault in Stavrock Church. Janet got home to find that she had missed John, who had hurried back to the East, leaving his little daughter in the care of an aunt. People said he was a broken man; but in this they were wrong. His wife was dead, but his work remained, thenceforth to receive his undivided attention. He was not in the least interested in his daughter. There would have been possibilities in a son, but a daughter could only serve to remind him of her mother. So for years he had seen little of her, though Janet, so far as she was capable of keeping her eye on anything west of Suez, had kept it on little Mary Plinn.

Then, one fine day, John had made another of his rare appearances in England. He had paid Mary, then aged seventeen, a flying visit, and had made a quick decision: she was to return to India with him.

Of course, the aunts and elderly cousins objected. John heard them out and smiled. "All right," he said, "we'll leave it to her." And Mary, looking at the father who for long years had been little more than a legend to her, never hesitated. "But of course I'll go," she said shyly. "I should love it."

So it had been settled. That was three years ago, three years of revelation. "Daddy," Mary would say, "how we *wasted* our time!" And Janplin would throw back his head and laugh and answer: "All my fault, my dear."

During these years she kept house for him in the strange places whither his work took him, and by common consent ruled with efficiency over the incongruous staffs he loved to collect round him. Janet saw less of Mary in her new life, though from time to time there were encounters in out-of-the-way parts of

the world, when Janet would suddenly appear as unconcernedly as if she were paying a week-end visit in England. John and she were the closest friends: he would dub her "the Cheshire Cat" or "the Wandering Scot" and chaff her on her sudden arrivals and departures; and they were never together for forty-eight hours without falling into the hottest disputes. It was an old complaint of John's that Janet had a knack of turning up just when trouble was brewing, and of adding something to the pot.

This time, Janet reflected, he would bring the charge with just cause; in fact, she felt more than a little doubtful of the welcome she would get in Sogdiana. For, frankly, she was going to give John a piece of her mind. The bone to be picked with him concerned Mary, and this life he was leading her. He had no business to gallivant about Central Asia with a pretty daughter who was just of an age to be having a good time in England. What chance would the child have of meeting the right sort of men—from a marriageable point of view—in a place like Sogdiana? Of course there was David Faversham—dear, sober David who scarcely seemed to count in that way. Otherwise, there might be a callow subaltern or two, or an occasional political officer with debts and a liver; and that was all. At least, it was not all. In his last letter, collected at Tehran, John had mentioned (without enthusiasm) something very like an engagement with a Major Custance, who was on his small staff; and what Janet knew about Major Custance was definite enough to send her across the mountains in the middle of a Persian winter. *That* business must be scotched. So she was armed with an offer, the cost of which only those who knew her would appreciate: she would take a house in town and give Mary a London season. Horrible, of course, but she could just bring herself to do it for John's daughter; and John would have to be sensible about it. Probably he would begin by tossing his head and saying,

"Mind your own business, Janet;" and then the fun would begin. Luckily the pair of them practised and respected plain speaking, so no offence would be taken on either side. Which was as well, as Janet was determined to put down that square, serviceably shod foot of hers.

Seriously, apart altogether from this Custance business, Sogdiana was no home for a girl of twenty—that is, if half of what was whispered at the caravanserai the night before was true. The rumour had it that the Russians were coming back; how effectively it was hard to say, for the accounts differed. According to some it was a mere foray of White bands whom the Emir's army would shortly scatter. Others—and this seemed to be the prevailing view—believed it to be a serious invasion, backed with men and money by Moscow. Undoubtedly there was something in the air. If she had found fear in the *serai*, there was stark loneliness in the country round the capital; as though the people had crept away to hide. She could hardly blame them. If the Russians *were* coming back, there was trouble ahead for Sogdiana—and perhaps for John Plinn, who notoriously had played a part in reviving the old Emirate. John was at heart a gambler, and, remote from the restraints of Simla or Whitehall, might well have staked too heavily. At least, if the game went against him, Mary was better out of the way.

So Janet mused, as she swayed along on her camel, struggling against a fatigue that clung to her like a second rider. How tired she was! Sogdiana might be the beginning of fresh alarms, but at least it would be the end of this tedious journey. She would have a good rest, and then John would give her men and camels and supplies to take her back to Persia or on to Kashmir; and by then the weather would surely have mended. Better still, she would get a hot bath and a warm bed; and at the thought of such luxury her whole body ached with craving, so that all else

was dust in the balance. A hot bath! A warm bed! A bath! A bed! She was muttering those blessed words in a rhythm with the padding footsteps of her camel. A bath! A bed! Her head began to nod, her chin slipped forward, and she lurched in her high saddle. Then she recovered and shook herself a little. She had nearly fallen off. She *must* keep awake. Were anything to happen to her the march would peter out like an unwound clock, and her men would cheerfully lie down in the snow and die. She half turned in her saddle, her long nose tilted upwards, her grizzled locks shaking against her weather-beaten cheeks, and pointing vaguely to the front with her whip, called hoarsely, "Sogdiana!" just to show her alertness.

She had expected no reply from her listless followers, but the man behind her straightened himself in his saddle, looked ahead, and echoed her cry: "Sogdiana!" The others took it up, wearily but with satisfaction in their voices. Then Janet saw. To her right front, about three miles away, a long scar had broken out on the grey-white ground. She could even trace the line of minaret and dome in the failing light. It was Sogdiana, hidden before in the cup in which it lay. She pulled round her camel's head. Now at last she could check her direction. Let the snow come when it pleased, she would make the city before nightfall.

As though in answer to her challenge, a lazy flake drifted gently down on her camel's head; and a minute later the caravan was riding through a white world.

(2)

Moula Buksh drew his heavy, quilted *khalat* a little more closely round his fat body, took a puff at his long pipe, and looked crossly out of the window. There it was, snowing again. As if the outlook were not bad enough already for a Hindu gentleman who

earned an honest (if precarious) livelihood by relieving the financial embarrassments of his fellow-citizens. And now, what was he to do? He could scarcely leave Sogdiana in this weather, to perish of cold, or be murdered by robbers, or be eaten by wild beasts. But if he stayed, what then? Ten days ago the Emir's army had marched out; and even Moula Buksh, who knew and wished to know little of armies, had not been impressed. The officers had been shouting bravely that they would return bringing the disturbers of the peace with halters round their necks. The men had been quieter, and it was the men whom Moula Buksh had watched, his sharp little eyes taking in every detail of their rusty rifles and their flimsy shoes. Here and there in the ranks he had seen a familiar face. He had noted with satisfaction that the army was taking with it many of the really bad men in Sogdiana. That was a good riddance, thought Moula, whose particular business it was to know such gentry by sight. But, unless he was much mistaken, these were not warriors: they were the sort that would fade inconspicuously from sight when the first shot was fired, and reappear like heroes when the looting began. Then there were a lot of boys and half-starved wretches who would join anything that promised them a little food; and a rabble of sulky fellows who had been pressed into the ranks at the last minute and would show a clean pair of heels at the first chance. Such an army, in Moula's opinion, was likely to be more dangerous to its friends than to its enemies.

Now they had been gone ten days, and no news of them had come back. There had been plenty of rumours, most of them not altogether pleasant, and from the reports of Moula's private intelligence service it seemed probable that the more unpleasant the rumour, the more likely it was to be true.

Were the Russians returning to Sogdiana? That was the point. Moula had no particular quarrel with the Russians—as Russians; in the old days of

the suzerainty a gentleman could carry on his professional activities without undue interference. But these Russians, it appeared, were a different *jat*, with strange and disturbing ideas about property and life, both of which they were reported to take very freely. Moula recalled the tales of what they had done in Bokhara, and his fat body quivered with apprehension. There was the man Bukholin; if he was coming . . .

Anyhow, the Emir would go, and that Moula minded little; the mad Englishman, Janplin, would also go, which, too, was no great matter. But what would happen to him—Moula Buksh, merchant and money-lender—when the bazaars were filled with wild Uzbegs and Kirghiz and the riff-raff of Asia, all armed and bent on plunder? It scarcely needed a prophet to answer that question. Moula was unlikely to forget the day, three years back, when the Russians left and the city broke into uproar. In a few minutes, as it seemed, his house—small and unpretentious as the home of a prudent Hindu *bunnia* should be—had become the centre of attention. A roystering mob had begun to batter at the street door and the shuttered windows, and when these held fast there were cries of "Bring paraffin" and "Smoke the old fox out." As he peeped in terror through a chink in an upper window, Moula had recognised in the crowd most of the gentlemen whose bonds he held. That had been enough for him. He had snatched up an armful of his most precious and portable possessions and slipped out by the little back door into the house of a friendly neighbour. There he had sat, wringing his hands in anguish, as a crackle of flames and clouds of smoke and a smell of burning drifted across from his old home. He had lost heavily in that catastrophe, but what he had taken with him was enough to enable him to set up business again. At first it had been difficult. He had had to write off many bad debts. But money was tight in Sogdiana, and soon the very men who had blandly denied their old liabilities,

challenging him to produce the evidence which they had been so careful to burn, were obsequiously craving the favour of a small loan. So business had begun once more, and, with a trifling adjustment of the rates of interest charged, Moula had in time recouped himself.

But he had had his lesson. If the Russians were now to come back, and disorder were to break out in the city, as most certainly it would, there would be a second and perhaps more serious mishap. Only that morning he had seen Ogdai Khan the Uzbeg swaggering down the street with his fierce, pointed moustache, his gay *khalat*, his painted, high-heeled shoes, and a small armoury of weapons peeping suggestively out of his person. Three months ago Moula had foreclosed on a piece of land belonging to the Uzbeg's family. That had possibly been imprudent, for Ogdai Khan had sworn vengeance, and in a matter like that (if in no other) Ogdai Khan was a man of his word. Also, everyone knew that trouble followed the Uzbeg as the foal of a donkey its dam. . . .

Moula struggled up from his cushions and lumbered across to the window. Still snowing! Should he go or stay? If he went, should he take his papers and valuables with him? If he did, he would lose his property and his life in the first *serai* at which he spent a night. If he left them behind—but where? Whom in the whole of Sogdiana could he trust to that extent? No one. At least, there was Major Faversham at the British Residency. He was a British Officer and a sahib, and more than once, for a consideration, Moula had obliged him with titbits of advance information on local politics. Yes, he could trust Major Faversham; but would that officer consent to become guardian of Moula's wealth? The English were queer, unaccountable people. Also, Janplin could hardly stay if the Russians returned. Moula puffed furiously at his *kalyan* and weighed the possibilities. What a dilemma he was in! In the

end he decided that Janplin was a great man and that property under his roof was likely to be as secure as anything in the city could be. Well, he—Moula—had promised to bring the Major any news that might reach him; and if the news, when it came, was bad, he would broach his own little problem. At any rate, the more he reflected, the more convinced he became that if things went ill in the north his safety in the city would be worth about as much as the promise of a Liuli (gipsy). Snow or no snow, bonds or no bonds, before it was too late he must, if possible, bestow his goods in safe-keeping and slip off somewhere himself.

But oh, the worry of it all! Why had he let so much money out at such a troubled time? Why had he come north from the Frontier province, where he was driving quite a prosperous little business under the sure shield of the British Raj? Why, for that matter, had he ever left Calcutta, to live among these restless, unbusiness-like, violent folk? He discharged a thin stream of tobacco juice from between his teeth and groaned aloud; and his fourth and latest wife entering the room timidly at that very moment, he fell upon her with a roar and beat her in sheer bitterness of heart.

(3)

The citadel, so white and dazzling on a sunny day, was turned to a cold grey by the besieging snowflakes that beat softly upon dome and minaret, or floated slyly through the wide, latticed windows. The state apartments, designed to withstand the heat of the long summer rather than the severity of the short winter, were cold and draughty; so that His Highness Mahomed Ali Abdurrahman Nasrullah, Emir of Sogdiana, a stout gentleman with a torpid eye and a grizzled beard, had ordered his slaves to drag his cushions as close as possible to the charcoal brazier that burned in a corner of the big, chilly room. There he lay, exposing his bulky frame in sections to the

grateful heat, and pondering discontentedly on the vicissitudes of fortune and the uneasiness of his lot. Really, when he came to think of it, he had scarcely had an hour's peace since the day when that tiresome fellow Fazz-ed-din marched into the palace and explained to him that the Unbelievers had gone and that he, Emir of Sogdiana and Shadow of God on Earth, was henceforth to rule his people according to his pleasure. *His* pleasure! There was impudence for you, when with his very next words the man had quietly claimed (and got) the chief office in the State. In a very short time the Emir had found himself sighing for the good old days of Russian rule, when he had had a settled income in monthly instalments from the Treasury, and when, beyond signing an occasional high-sounding proclamation, and paying a few state visits to the Mosques, nothing had been required of him save that he should live the life of a gentleman of refinement and leisure. Fazz-ed-din (curse him!) had soon changed all that—with the connivance of the mad Englishman Janplin, who had appeared a few weeks later and calmly settled himself in the old Russian Residency, so inconveniently close to the Citadel. The pair of them were as thick as thieves, and not nearly such good company. They were always urging him on to unpleasant duties, to frequent public appearances which bored him, to speeches at meetings of notables whom collectively and individually he cordially disliked, to setting his name to various arbitrary acts which were certain to make him unpopular and would probably result in attempts on his life. *His* pleasure, indeed! Once, at the beginning of the new dispensation, he had protested. He was, he had explained to Fazz-ed-din in delicate and poetical language, a singing-bird, confined so long within its cage as to become incapable of freedom. "But your Highness can go on singing," was all he had had for answer from the insolent fellow. Allah! how he disliked that man, with his Highness

this and Highness that, and his tedious allusions to "Your Highness's distinguished ancestor the great Tamerlane!" (as though anyone believed that old story!). How he would love to have him thrown from the Minar Kitan, as was his grandfather's way with people who displeased him. But if *he* were to give such an order to-day, who would carry it out? No one. And Janplin would probably treat it as a good jest and give one of his objectionable, barking laughs.

The pair of them were too much for him, and that was the truth. One day, quite early in the new régime, he had resolved to summon his courage and dismiss his obnoxious Dewan. After all, he had told himself, he was the Emir and had now the right to choose his advisers. But when, very nervously, he had begun with a quotation from an early Imam to the effect that all good things must come to an end and the best of friends must part, Fazz-ed-din's manner had become so unpleasant that he had hastily changed the subject with some harmless remark about the weather. The next day Janplin had called at the palace and dropped the most disquieting hints about abdications and regencies; though what business it was of Janplin's Allah alone knew.

Well! And what was to happen next? Nowadays nobody ever told him anything except palace gossip —and not all of that—but he was quite well aware that the other day the army—his army, confound it all!— had marched bravely out of the city; and he had heard it whispered in the *andarun*—the ladies always had the latest news, and there was another mystery for you: they *said* they got it from the eunuchs, but you never could tell—at any rate the women were saying that the Russians were coming back.

To be truthful, which was scarcely his habit, His Highness would not be altogether sorry if the report were correct; the Russians, if they came, might rid him of Fazz-ed-din and the Englishman. But the disturbing thought had occurred to him that they

might not stop short at that point, but might include him in the eviction. Of course, he could explain how glad he was to see them back, and how cordially he detested his present advisers; but would they believe him? In Bokhara—and at the thought of what had lately been done in Bokhara the Emir turned a little green. Yes, he might find it difficult to convince them of his detachment from the events of the past three years. So there he was, caught like a bird in a net. If the army won—and knowing the army, he could hardly believe this possible—Fazz-ed-din and Janplin would continue to afflict him. And if the army lost—what was he to do then? Leave Sogdiana? In all his life he had only twice been outside the walls of the city. He had nowhere to go; he had no friends whom he could trust and, thanks again to Fazz-ed-din, no money. So there he was—through no fault of his. It was too bad; and Fazz-ed-din, who had got him into this mess, had probably been feathering his nest for three years and would clear out at once when the trouble began. The man was a coward, an impostor, a traitor. He would tell him so. Yes, by Allah! he would. Or better, he reflected with a touch of caution, he would refuse to see the man at all. That would be easier. When he called, as he did with distressing frequency, the Emir would always be occupied. Yes, that would——

A slave softly entered the room and saluted. "His Excellency the Dewan is here and craves an audience with Your Highness."

The Emir rolled over on his cushions and sat up, his face puckered like a sulky child's. Now was his chance, now—"Tell his Excellency," he began—"tell him, tell him——" and then, "Let his Excellency approach," he added crossly.

(4)

Rifleman Ko Pangi of the 13th Gurkha Rifles was on duty at the main gate of the old Russian Residency.

The snow was floating into the sentry-box, the flakes resting for a moment unthawed on the squat brown nose, set between merry eyes, that peeped out of a balaclava cap.

Ugh! it was cold. Ko Pangi curled and uncurled his toes in his heavy ammunition boots and furtively frotted the fingers of his right hand up and down the barrel of his rifle. Not so cold as it had been last winter at the depot at Almora, nor as sometimes it was in his own valley in remote Nepal. But here, in this flat country, without a hill worthy of the name, it was not to be expected and therefore the more keenly felt.

For his part, he would not be sorry when the detachment returned to India. His furlough was due in the coming hot weather. He would go back to his village, acquire a wife—an easy matter with the pay he had saved—and swagger a little among his friends who did not wear the King-Emperor's uniform.

He blew to dislodge a flake that had fallen on his face and scanned with an indifferent eye the wide square across which a few belated figures, muffled in long sheepskin coats or quilted *khalats*, were hastening homewards. Ko Pangi had formed the poorest opinion of the inhabitants of Sogdiana. Like all Gurkhas he was not over-modest; in his view the world held only two races of real men—the Nepalese and the English. (In the latter class he placed the Highland regiments, with whom he claimed a particular kinship.) But even among the lesser breeds these people of Sogdiana occupied the lowest of places. They reminded him of the grey *langur* apes that chattered and chased each other up and down the *khud* in the foothills of the Himalaya. In other words, they were conceited, garrulous, idle and cowardly. A few days ago he had watched what they were pleased to call their army march out to take the field, and had reflected, in no spirit of boastfulness, that a platoon of Gurkhas would be more than a match for that slovenly rabble. Person-

ally he would prefer worthier adversaries. Lately, and with pains, his thick little head had mastered the intricacies of the Lewis gun; and with one of these miraculous weapons cuddled firmly to his shoulder, he was ready, in the absence of a stouter foe, to show these so-called warriors a little of the meaning of war. But what folly was this—if it was true that the city was threatened—to send these worthless creatures out to fight, while fifty Gurkhas—the flower of Nepal—remained idle in the city? Still, these were high matters, beyond his ken. Doubtless Mansell Sahib and the great Janplin knew what they were about. Now the talk in the bazaar was all of the battle that must soon be fought. It was whispered that the army might suffer defeat, which he could well believe, and that then the victors would enter the city. Well, let them come. But let them be careful to behave with due respect towards their betters; otherwise they were likely to find in Number 12 Platoon of the 13th Gurkha Rifles a very much more formidable adversary than the army of Sogdiana. Ko Pangi sighed, and his thoughts roved elsewhere—to his home in Nepal, his chances of obtaining a coveted stripe, the quality of the rations, and—on the far horizon—the peaceful old age he would spend when, with pension fairly earned, he would lord it in his mountain village and see that the yearly quota of recruits was up to standard.

Presently, a shuffle of feet and an order from the guardroom warned him of the approach of his relief, and he drew himself up in readiness. It was good hearing. A little food, a little sleep. . . .

(5)

Four men sat in the Staff Room at the old Russian Residency, now the Headquarters of the British Mission to His Highness the Emir of Sogdiana. The first, Major Aylmer Custance, was lighting cigarette after cigarette and flinging them half-smoked into the

fire. In the gloom of the room, the flames threw a fitful light on his big dark eyes, his sallow complexion, and his crisp little black moustache, as he lay stretched out in a low cane chair. Handsome in his style you might judge him, but a man of moods—at the moment, of moodiness; restless, yet languid, with the kind of languor that drops quickly enough from a man when need arises; a bad enemy, you would guess, a formidable ally, and, perhaps, not too good a friend. Opposite him, sitting rather upright in a Roorkee chair, was Major David Faversham, the older by a year or two, quiet, solid possibly even to slowness, but with a glint of humour in a grey eye and a reassuring steadiness about the chin. He was puffing away at his pipe and watching the spurt and sparkle of the flames from the burning logs. Between the two sat a third, Freddy Mansell, subaltern and O.C. Gurkha detachment, a pleasant youth of twenty who was turning the pages of a six-months-old *Bystander*, the contents of which he already almost knew by heart. At the window, hands deep in pockets, stood the tubby little doctor, surveying the falling snow with a quizzical eye, while he whistled, atrociously out of tune, "King Wenceslas," as being the most seasonable piece in his repertory.

Faversham at length looked over his shoulder at him. "Must you?" he demanded.

The doctor whipped round on him. "And that's all the thanks I get, is it," he cried, "for trying to keep up the party's spirits? 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind. . . .'" He took a pace towards Faversham. "Don't be sad, laddie," he urged. "Be glad. Be happy. Look at me, Don Saturnino."

"Oh, God!" groaned Faversham. "Will no one stifle this pestilent quack?"

"It might be done," suggested Mansell, looking up, "with cushions."

"Quacks, is it?" exclaimed the little doctor truculently. "And cushions, is it? Take that, you disrespectful young hooligan!" And with a fierce

movement he snatched up a cushion and flung it, well-aimed, at Mansell, who, ducking, took it squarely on the head, to the disorder of his short, fair hair. But as Freddy sprang up gleefully to give battle, Custance's voice fell like a splash of cold water.

"For Christ's sake don't start bear-gardening!" he growled. "Sit down, Mansell."

The boy obeyed with a good-humoured laugh, shaking his *Bystander* at the doctor.

Custance flung another cigarette into the fire and spoke again. "This waiting business is the limit," he said, as though half in apology for his outburst. "Can't understand why there isn't any news."

"Perhaps," suggested Faversham mildly, "because there isn't any—yet."

Custance grunted impatiently. Just the sort of fatuous answer that fellow would make!

Mansell laid aside his *Bystander* once more. "I say," he remarked, "what's the next move if brother Bolshie puts it across the local army and walks in?"

"For the Lord's sake," snapped Custance, his irritation boiling over, "don't ask idiotic questions! How should we know?"

"Sorry," apologised Mansell, flushing.

Custance got up and began to pace restlessly about the room. "This has been a fool's game from start to finish," he went on. "The Chief must be crazy——"

"I think, if I were you, I'd leave the Chief out of it." Faversham, half-turning in his chair, spoke quickly.

Custance wheeled round on him in a blaze of temper. "Probably you would," he retorted, with a sneer in his voice. "But it's not a bad thing that there are one or two people left in Sogdiana who aren't blind and deaf and dumb where Janplin's concerned. He may be a great man, but he's made an infernal mess of this show."

"Oh, dry up, Custance," said Faversham wearily. "What's the good of all this?"

Mansell looked unhappily from one man to the

other. He hated these rows, which had lately become more frequent. It was a pity the two of them hit it off so badly; they were both good chaps, though Custance did drop rather heavily on a fellow at times. But of course Faversham was right; it wasn't quite the thing to carp at the Chief, as Custance was doing. Only nerves, of course, but still . . .

Custance's next remark might have added fresh fuel to the dispute, but the little doctor, in his own way, intervened, walking up to him with a comic assumption of a bedside manner. "Let me see your tongue," he said severely. "What you want, my lad——"

The door opened, and Mansell sprang to his feet. It had been natural and inevitable that, within forty-eight hours of reaching the Residency, he should lose his young heart to Mary Plinn: yet she never came suddenly into a room, as she came now, without striking him with a wonder that anyone quite like her should be encountered in Sogdiana. It was, he put it to himself, as though he had stepped—for a fleeting moment—into an English garden in June; as though in her presence was a charm to conjure away the constraints and deprivations of exile. For that alone he was blissfully content to fetch and carry, to adore at a respectful distance by day, and to dream his dreams by night.

Mary paused in the doorway, smiling a little, very young and very fair, her blue eyes looking from the doctor to Mansell, from Custance to Faversham. She must have been conscious of tension in the room, for she seemed about to say something, and then to think better of it.

"Oh, may I come in?" she asked. Willing hands dragged forward the most comfortable chair, but she ignored it and perched herself on the edge of the heavy teak table.

"Such excitement," she said. "Who do you think has just arrived?"

"The mail," guessed Faversham. (There had been none for three weeks.)

"Old Pooh Bah Fazz-ed-din," suggested Mansell.

"Don't tell me that the Shadow of God has come to tea," exclaimed the doctor.

"Wrong, all of you," replied Mary. "It's my most beloved Aunt Janet."

"Janet Gilchrist!" exclaimed Faversham. "Well, it's snowing hard, and brigands have been reported near the Great Ford, and the passes from Persia are practically closed, so I suppose it *would* be Janet."

"But what on earth brings her here just now?" demanded Custance.

"Ah," said Mary, "you don't know Aunt Janet. David's not surprised, but he and Aunt Janet are old friends. In fact, it's almost a romance."

"Don't rub it in," smiled Faversham, moving towards the door. "I'll go and pay my salaams to the lady."

"You'll have to hurry," called Mary. "She was with Daddy, but the poor darling's had a frightful journey. She's dead beat, and going to bed as soon as her room's ready."

The doctor followed Faversham, declaring that he had just remembered a sick Gurkha; and Mansell, alone with an unofficially engaged pair, fidgeted in his chair for a minute or two and then rose with a muttered remark about having a word with his Subadar.

The other two sat on, Mary still smiling happily, Custance mechanically lighting another cigarette. Then he spoke, as though on a sudden impulse.

"Mary, I can't stand much more of this."

Mary turned towards him with eyes wide open. "Why, Aylmer, what's the matter?"

"Everything. Me, you, your father, Faversham: this being half-engaged and half not: the uncertainty——"

"But Daddy explained that. He thinks I'm too

young to know my own mind, bless him, and that we ought to wait till I've been home."

"He's against me," persisted Aylmer.

Mary shook her head so vehemently as to set her short gold locks dancing. "Daddy's the fairest person in the world."

"You've no business to be here at all," Custance went on, following his own train of thought. "It's all wrong—especially just now."

"Aylmer, I'm not told much of what goes on. Is there going to be trouble?"

"Trouble? There's always the possibility in a hole like Sogdiana. I—oh, it's all pretty rotten. And another thing—you may as well have the whole story—that fellow Faversham's getting on my nerves. Patronising, priggish ass!"

"Aylmer! How can you be so absurd! David—David's a very old friend."

Custance's face darkened. "Lately," he said, "I've been wondering whether he isn't something more."

Mary slipped off the table and stood, very upright in her indignation. "Don't be silly, Aylmer," she said. "I know you don't like David, and I'm sorry for it, but you might be just to him—and me."

"He's in love with you." Aylmer was also standing up.

"That's not true. Aylmer!"

Custance strode angrily to the window and stood there, watching the softly falling snow. His temper began to ooze away, leaving behind it a sense, if not of shame, at least of folly at his outburst. That he should behave like a jealous boy! When he turned again he had fought back to self-control.

"Mary darling, forgive me," he said. "I—I've been so infernally worried that I scarcely know what I'm saying. Forget it, dearest—say you forget it, and forgive me."

"Aylmer, there's nothing to forgive. It's just that

I hate to hear you say things that aren't—aren't quite worthy of you."

"Worthy of *me!*" Custance laughed, a little bitterly. "You mustn't put me on a pedestal. I'm not a saint by a long chalk. Sometimes I think your father's right when he objects to our engagement."

He was standing in front of her and now caught both her hands in his.

"Mary, promise me you'll not change, whatever happens—however mean and beastly I am—whatever I say—whatever anyone says."

"Aylmer, don't you know?"

"Yes," he muttered, "I know, and bless you for your loyalty."

She moved a little closer to him.

CHAPTER II

JANPLIN

FAVERSHAM walked down a couple of corridors and opened the door of what was at once the office and sanctum of Sir John Plinn, British Resident at the capital city of His Highness the Emir of Sogdiana. It was a bare, business-like room, without frills; the room of a man accustomed for long years to the life of the *dâk* bungalow. There was an air almost of protest about the two big photographs—one of his wife, so long dead, and the other of Mary—presiding in their silver frames over the untidiness of the writing table. For the rest, there were a couple of low chairs, a filing cabinet, a safe, a litter of books and papers indiscriminately mingled, and a few pipes—old friends—so blackened and corroded as to be unfit for other than purely male surroundings.

Faversham found himself too late to intercept Janet Gilchrist, who had already vanished to the hot bath and warm bed with the promise of which she had sustained herself during the last weary miles of her ride. Janplin was alone, very long and thin and brown, stretching his legs to the blaze of the fire and turning over a sheaf of papers.

"That you, David?" he asked, without looking up. "Come in. Janet Gilchrist's just arrived."

"So I hear. Out of the blue."

"As usual." Plinn gave a little laugh. "Seven mangy camels, all within a mile or so of foundering, four rascally retainers, all on the edge of mutiny, and no food worth mentioning. Wonderful woman, Janet, but she'll play that game once too often."

"Perhaps she'll not be the only one to do that," suggested Faversham, with a faint smile. Ten years of devoted service had won him the liberty of such remarks. At Simla, where his Chief, though feared, was not always appreciated, Faversham was known as "the man who can say things to Plinn."

"Eh?" Plinn looked up sharply under his shaggy eyebrows and laughed again. "Well, perhaps. No news, I suppose?"

"Not a word."

"Not even from that *bunnia* fellow of yours—what's his name?"

"Moula Buksh. No."

"And in these parts no news is bad news." Plinn uncoiled himself and rose, standing sideways to the fire and knocking out a pipe. "I shall fix Janet up," he went on, "and send her packing as soon as she's fit to travel. Mary shall go with her."

"Ah! I'm glad of that."

"Should have sent the girl a month ago, but I couldn't very well take any of you fellows off the job to go with her. With Janet and a decent escort she's as safe as anyone can be in this country."

"From the latest accounts the road to Persia is still open," added Faversham.

"Yes, but they'll have to hustle if things go badly at this end. Let's see: to-day's Tuesday. We'll try to shift Janet by Saturday. You might start collecting camels for her, David; they're a bit scarce since the army took the field."

The door opened softly to admit Plinn's bearer. "His Excellency the Dewan is here."

"Ah, Fazz-ed-din," said Plinn; "show him in. Don't go, David; we may want you."

A moment later the virtual ruler of Sogdiana entered. Faversham found himself watching the two men with the detached interest he always felt when he saw them together. So different they were, and yet in each was the same vital spark of adventure. Janplin

had been his master through storm and shine in some of the more turbulent places of the earth. David knew and loved all his little tricks of manner; his habit of suddenly jerking back his head when he was talking with a man, and fixing him with a pair of eyes that pierced through skin and bone to the very soul; the pause, and then the decision, sharp as the crack of a rifle. He loved, too, to watch the play of the man's power: his uncanny knowledge of what his fellow—especially his Eastern fellow—was thinking, so that he seemed to thread with ease the windings of the most tortuous mind; the simplicity before which finesse wilted like a flower in the Indian sun; the single-mindedness that burnt like the flame of a candle in a quiet room; the directness which sought a purpose as a drill drives through a steel section; and the kind of coolness that freezes to hard ice when the stakes are doubled and the hazard is taken.

Fazz-ed-din was a harder book to read. No one knew much about him, who he was or whence he came. The fairness of his complexion and the directness of his manner were almost Western. Reputed a Turk by race, he had appeared in Sogdiana twenty years ago and made a fortune in the new cotton trade which the Russians were fostering. Gradually he had become one of the men who counted, and in the collapse of Russian rule he had taken the lead as though it were his birthright. He had qualities—courage, imagination, energy. His enemies, who were innumerable, charged him with the grossest crimes, of which peculation on a gigantic scale was one of the least. But David liked and respected him; he was a personality, David reflected as he watched the fine-drawn lines of his face, his melancholy air, the suggestion of hidden steel behind the languid grace of his manner. He saw in him no ordinary climber, but a man of ideas; ambitious, yes, but it was no mean ambition to try to erect a state out of the crumbling ruins of the age-old Emirate; ruthless, yes again, but

you cannot play the game of Eastern politics in kid gloves; a gambler, certainly: otherwise he would not be where he was. David liked him, too, for his unexpected frankness. He had accepted Janplin as an ally. A time might come when their purposes clashed, but for the moment they had a common object, and in pursuing it Fazz-ed-din gave the other all or almost all his confidence. For two years they had worked together—Fazz-ed-din openly and boldly, Janplin in the background as befitted his position as representative of His Britannic Majesty; but both building, building, building—and when, as happened again and again, a foundation gave and a structure dissolved into the dust, coming together and patiently starting afresh.

Now was the testing time, when all that they had done and tried to do was threatened; yet David, absorbed in the personal equation, forgot the larger issue for a moment.

Fazz-ed-din greeted the two Englishmen courteously, and then looked steadily at Plinn.

"If I might have a few words with you," he began in perfect English, with a deprecating glance at David.

"I was just going, Excellency," murmured David, moving towards the door.

"Faversham knows all the secrets," suggested Plinn.

Fazz-ed-din gave a little bow, but said nothing. David hastened his departure.

"News?" asked Plinn, when they were alone—the old, old question.

Fazz-ed-din shook his head. "If that were all I would not have risked offending Major Faversham's feelings. Sir John, I speak now not to the British representative in Sogdiana, but to yourself—to Janplin, if you please."

Plinn looked doubtful. "I won't undertake not to answer as—as British representative," he replied. "But I think you had better tell me the trouble."

"Forgive me," said Fazz-ed-din. He walked to the

door, opened it quickly, looked outside, and closed it very carefully. Then he went to the big window and peered out on to the verandah. Plinn watched him with a faintly quizzical smile: the man, he reflected, was enough of an Oriental to love an atmosphere of conspiracy.

"Sir John," Fazz-ed-din began, as soon as he was satisfied of the absence of eavesdroppers, "it is well to hope for the best and to prepare for the worst. You know—no man better—the position. If the threat from the North is—only a threat, all may be well: the army will do what is necessary."

"As I see it," said Plinn slowly, "it's a game of bluff on both sides. The Russians made the first move, when they let Kossoutoff and his people cross the provisional frontier. Now they are watching for your reaction. To send the army to expel them was a bold retort—but bluff, Fazz-ed-din, pure bluff, as we shall find, if Kossoutoff really means business. As a fighting force the army is—well, not exactly first-rate."

Fazz-ed-din nodded. "If we had only had a little more time!" he said. "Another two years, and with the officers who are coming from India, and the new equipment we have ordered, we would make something of the army. At present——" He spread out his hands in a gesture of dismay.

"Still, there's a sporting chance that the Russians will not call your bluff this time, that they don't want the trouble to come just yet."

"A chance, yes. But what I fear—and fear more with every day that passes—is that they will stand and fight. Then——"

Plinn nodded. "They'll be in Sogdiana within a week."

"Yes. And when that happens—I hold nothing back from you, Sir John—I shall no longer be here. Nor perhaps, if you are wise, will you."

"That's quite another matter," said Plinn quietly.

"It is for you to decide. For my part, I shall not despair even then. Once before I have seen Russia in occupation, and Russian rule melt in an afternoon like snow in the sun. A few months, a few years, and these new men—Bolsheviks you call them—will go the way of the others, of all the conquerors of the East. You people," he went on, with a note of passion in his voice, "who come from the West—you scratch your patterns on the sand, and they look pretty; but the wind blows over the desert, and what remains?" He gave a little sigh and paused, his fingers playing gently with the edge of the table-cloth. "I can wait, Sir John. But there are matters to secure now, if all is to go well in the future. There is the Emirate."

"Ah, His Highness," said Plinn. "Do you propose to take him with you when you leave? Rather a tiresome companion in exile, I should imagine."

Fazz-ed-din ignored the scarcely hidden contempt in the other man's words. As always, he knew exactly what he wanted, and cared for the opinions of others only so far as they might affect the issue.

"Exactly," he said dryly. "I am not greatly concerned for His Highness. As you are well aware, Sir John, for a considerable period his chief object—if he can be said to have an object—has been to rid himself of me: he has no sympathy with what I—what we—have been trying to achieve in Sogdiana. His Highness can therefore shift for himself. But the Emirate is another matter. I have little faith in your Western Republics—for Eastern peoples. Here in Sogdiana a man must rule—a man, if possible, of the line of Tamerlane."

"There is the boy Daoud," said Plinn. "Quite a promising youngster."

"Yes. I believe that, removed from the influence of the palace, he may grow up to be—an Emir. Therefore I sent him last night with a trustworthy escort for Persia——"

Plinn whistled under his breath.

" —Where, if things go badly with us," continued Fazz-ed-din calmly, " I propose to join him."

" And leave Sogdiana to stew in its own juice? Hang it all, Fazz-ed-din! "

This time the protest could scarcely be overlooked. The Turk saw that it would be hard to persuade the man; yet persuade him he must.

" Do not misunderstand me, Sir John," he pleaded. " For my own safety I care nothing—not that; " he snapped his fingers softly; " for the big thing, all. I see the Emirate in the future, independent, free—yes, free from Russia and also, Sir John, free from England —a country like Persia or Afghanistan, where the East rules the East. For that I would offer my life gladly, when the time came. But the time is not now."

Plinn watched him critically. The man was patently genuine; a fanatic; certainly no coward, as he had reason to know.

" I see," he said slowly. " Well, what do you want me to do? "

Fazz-ed-din's face lightened. " You are the one man in whom I may confide," he said, " and if you had refused to help me it would have been—difficult." He leaned forward, and began to whisper.

The minutes slipped by, and still that insistent whisper went on, its sibilance and the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece the only sounds in the room.

At last Plinn flung back his head with a characteristic gesture.

" My dear fellow," he said, " if all this trouble comes, do you imagine the Residency will be unmolested? At best, we shall be kicked out in a hurry; at worst, anything may happen. Why, you hinted that yourself."

The whisper began again; when it died away Plinn rose from his chair and stalked restlessly about the room.

" I don't like it," he broke out. " It's most irregular. If it were known, our position would become impossible."

"But you will help me," pleaded Fazz-ed-din. "You are the only man I can trust," he repeated.

Plinn stood silent for a moment and then wheeled round on him. "Very well," he said, "but I must tell Faversham."

"Is that necessary?"

"Yes."

Fazz-ed-din knew instinctively that the point must be conceded and gave a little sigh of acquiescence. "You will make him understand?" he ventured.

"I will answer for his silence as for my own," replied Plinn. "Have you got it with you?"

"Yes." Fazz-ed-din groped in his breast pocket and produced a tiny wallet of leather. Janplin took it, held it for a moment between his fingers, and then, as with a sudden decision, turned and strode to a corner of the room. He unlocked the big safe that stood there, swung open the heavy door, deposited the wallet inside and closed the safe again. "There," he said with a slight smile. "Till you claim it, Fazz-ed-din."

"Till I claim it," replied Fazz-ed-din gravely.

CHAPTER III

A PIECE OF MISS GILCHRIST'S MIND

(1)

"rr sounds to me a pretty kettle of fish," remarked Janet Gilchrist. She was sitting in the big drawing-room, repairing a rent in her riding-breeches, a task which she obstinately refused to resign to other hands. "No, my dear," she had replied to Mary's offer of her ayah's help. "When my reputation as a decent Scotswoman is at stake, I prefer to do the work myself. Then I know just where I am." After a night's rest and a "Europe morning" (as she styled a long lie in bed), she had shaken off the fatigues of her journey, and for the last half-hour had been making an excellent listener to John Plinn, as he stood by the fireplace and expounded local politics. "All the same," she went on, holding her breeches to the light to inspect progress, "we are not at war with Russia, so that even if Fuzzy-what's-his-name's army turns tail, you people should be all right."

"In theory, yes. But there are complications. You see, I came here originally on the express invitation of Admiral Koltchak, who was then actual ruler of Russia in Asia. He was afraid of Bolshevist intrigue down here and thought I wouldn't be a bad caretaker."

"Sensible man. And now he's gone, what does Moscow say about it?"

"So far, nothing. Between Downing Street and the Soviet the subject of Sogdiana has been by mutual if tacit consent avoided—perhaps as being likely to raise fresh ructions. After all, I'm nominally just

British representative at the court of the Emir. Actually, I may have been a little more than that."

"I can believe you," said Janet dryly. "So you expect to get your marching orders if and when the Russians arrive?"

"Probably," replied Janplin abstractedly. "Janet, I want you to take Mary with you when you go on Saturday."

"Saturday! You're not very hospitable, Johnny. I had been promising myself to stay for at least a week."

"Sorry. I should have begun by asking you solemnly, 'What are your plans?'" laughed Plinn. "But seriously, if the army goes under, it might be six months before you could leave. The whole country will be up, and every robber between here and Persia will be at his trade."

"And you?" asked Janet. "What will you do?"

"Stay here," said Plinn grimly, "until I'm kicked out. I've no business to go until I get my release from Delhi, and that'll take time to come. Besides, there are other reasons. I feel a little responsible for this show; don't care about leaving the sinking ship like the proverbial rat. Also, if I did, it wouldn't be exactly healthy for British prestige all over the East. You know how news spreads."

"Yes. But, John, if things get really nasty——"

Janplin laughed. "I'm not meeting trouble half-way. At worst—well, we go down fighting. 'Ever upon the topmost roof' and all that sort of thing. Mind," he added abruptly, "not a word of all this to Mary. If she gets it into her obstinate little head that we're in for a bad time here, you'll have to sew her up in a sack and carry her to Tehran."

"Oh, my dear, I hope it's going to come right," exclaimed Janet in real distress. "Of course, I'll take Mary. You know I came here meaning to lecture you, but just at the moment I haven't the heart to do it."

"Keep it for better days," said Plinn. "Just at

present I'm not a good subject for lectures." He smiled at her.

"I'm afraid you've sometimes found me a dreadful nuisance," confessed Janet.

"I don't now. You're a godsend, my dear. You're taking Mary off my chest."

(2)

Her talk with Janplin ended, Janet sought out David Faversham, with the intention of delivering to him—in his old capacity of general confidant—the lecture she had just spared his Chief. She found him in the little room where he worked.

"Am I interrupting?" she inquired from the door.

"Not a bit. Come in, Janet. It's good to see you again, and we must have a *bukh*." He swept some papers off a chair and gave her a cigarette.

"Janplin has just shaken me to the core," explained Janet. "David, I don't like the look of things for you people."

David shrugged his shoulders. "We've been in tight places before."

"I know, but—anyhow, I haven't come to talk politics. There was something I wanted to say to Janplin, but when I found out how things were, I couldn't bring myself to do it just now. So I'm going to say it to you first."

"Thank you, Janet. Is it one of your lectures?"

"It's about Mary."

"Ah! She's going with you on Saturday, I hope?"

"Oh yes, it's not that. David, saving myself, you're about the best and oldest friend these two dear people have. I want you to tell me this: how serious is this engagement with Major Custance?"

David tilted his chair a little. "You know Mary," he said. "When she's made up her mind to anything she's her father's own daughter. A word from her is as good as an affidavit from most people. She's accepted

Custance and, all being well, in due course she'll marry him."

"So I supposed. And now tell me this: do you like Custance?"

"He's not an easy man to know," David hedged. "He's got a splendid record: very gallant in the War, and Janplin thinks a lot of his ability."

"You haven't answered my question. Do you like him?"

"No," said David after a pause, "I don't. Everybody here knows we don't hit it off. But please understand I've nothing against him."

"But I have," asserted Janet emphatically, having come to one of her sudden decisions. "Now listen to me, and when I've finished you shall tell me whether the man's a proper husband for that child. Did you happen to know Eleanor Greatorex?"

David pondered. "No, I don't think so," he answered.

"I was her godmother, and at one time saw a good deal of her. Her parents died when she was a child and she often came to me for advice—not that she ever took it." Janet sighed. "It's an old, old story, and none the nicer for that. Two years ago Eleanor met this man Custance staying at the Revelswoods'. I've never seen him, but by all accounts he's the sort of man that a certain sort of girl is bound to make a fool of herself over."

"That I can understand," said David.

"Anyhow, that was exactly what Eleanor did. It was her first serious affair of the kind, poor child: I should say it was not his, by any means. He was then, or pretended to be, as much in love as she was; there was nothing to prevent their marrying, and he gave her a promise. Later, like a little fool, she went to dinner with him one evening at his flat in London. Remember, she was crazy about him; knew nothing about life—or men; trusted him completely." Janet paused. "Well, you can guess what happened. Afterwards,

she found she was going to have a baby, and he, by that time, had begun to cool off. She wrote—twice, and he never answered. Then she came to me. I begged her to let me deal with him, but she wouldn't hear of it. She went up to London herself to see him; he was out, and she waited for him in his flat. When he came back, he would scarcely listen to her. Told her brutally that he couldn't afford to marry; he was very sorry; and good-bye. Eleanor returned to the little cottage in Oxfordshire where she was living. Next day she was missing; and three days later they found her body in the river. There was a letter for me which told me as much of the story as I did not already know. I kept it to myself, of course."

"Janet!" exclaimed David, after a moment of horrified silence. "How—how damnable!"

"And that's the pretty fellow who wants to marry Mary. She's got money coming to her, David, and poor Eleanor had nothing to speak of: that's the difference."

"It's impossible," David burst out. "What an utter, unmitigated cad! Janet, you're quite sure of your facts? But of course you are."

"As a matter of fact," said Janet, "it was my job to clear up the child's papers after her death. Among them was a letter the man had been fool enough to write. I suppose he thought he was safe with an innocent like Eleanor. Anyhow, he gave himself away about as thoroughly as a man could."

"We shall have to stop it," muttered David uncomfortably.

"That was my chief reason for coming to Sogdiana—to warn Janplin off his prospective son-in-law. I shirked the job this morning, but it's got to be done before I leave."

David swung himself out of his chair and began to pace the room with jerky footsteps. The watchdog in him had barked.

"Yes," he began, "but——"

"Is there any 'but' about it?"

"You know Janplin as well as I do. How do you suppose he'll take it?"

Janet smiled grimly. "I should say he would kick Master Custance half-way across Asia. For what that young man is about to receive the Lord make me truly thankful!"

"Yes, only I should like my toe to be inside the boot. But, Janet, you and I are practical folk. *Can* we tell Janplin now?"

"You mean——?"

"Just what you meant when you kept quiet this morning. Janplin's bothered up to his eyes. Is it fair to give him the extra worry? That's one reason. The other is that you can't shoot a man out of Sogdiana as if it were Aldershot, especially if it's midwinter and he doesn't know the language or the ropes. Unless"—with the ghost of a smile—"you'd like to take him with you on Saturday."

Janet's mouth tightened. "He might start with me, but I'd not answer for the creature coming out at the other end."

"And if he's to stay on here, it would be just as well if Janplin didn't throw a boot at him every time he saw him."

"So you'd not tell Janplin at all? David, I mean to stop this marriage; I'll stop it if I have to stand up in church and forbid the banns."

For a moment David had a disconcerting picture of that strangely attired figure breaking in on the decorum of Mattins in some respectable West End church.

"Why tell him now?" he urged. "After all, Mary's going and Custance is staying. Nothing more can happen till the summer."

"Very well," said Janet. "But I shall tell Mary when I get her to myself."

David was silent.

"Now what is it?" cried Janet with a touch of impatience. "Surely you wouldn't leave that child

thinking she's engaged to a model of chivalry and writing him letters by every mail? "

"I think I would—for the present."

"The man's mad!"

"Look here, Janet, this is how I see it. Mary's terribly young, living in fairyland or—or in a chapter of the *Morte d'Arthur*. We're all perfect knights and models of chivalry; she just hasn't found us out yet. How can you go to her with this—this foul story?"

"It's time she learnt a little about life."

"She'll eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge soon enough without our help," persisted David. "Janet, can't we leave her a little longer in her enchanted garden?"

"Sentiment!" snorted Janet.

"If you like. Anything may happen here in the next few months. Afterwards——"

"You mean," said Janet suddenly, "that if Aylmer Custance is alive and in England this summer, and the engagement holds, we should tell Mary, and not before."

"Yes. Or better, Janplin. After all, it's his business."

Janet sighed, and rose to her feet. "I suppose you must have your way, though I should have dearly loved to tell that young man what I think of him."

"I too. But there it is."

As Janet reached the door she spoke again. "You know, my dear," she said, "I used to hope once that there might be something between you and Mary."

David blushed like an awkward schoolboy. "What, me!" he replied with a dry little laugh. "Oh Lord, no. She regards me as a sort of heavy uncle."

"She's a little idiot," commented Janet.

(3)

David had scarcely settled himself once more at his table when Mary's smooth golden head appeared round the door. "Put those horrible papers away," she commanded. "I want to talk to you."

David having meekly obeyed, Mary established herself in the chair which Janet had just vacated.

"Now, my David," she said, "what's this little plot you and Daddy have been hatching?"

"Plot?" inquired David mildly.

"Oh, don't pretend to be innocent. This plan to send me away from Sogdiana."

"Janplin's idea," said David. "'We don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go.' He's right, Mary."

"Indeed!" she retorted. "I suppose it doesn't occur to you that I may want to be consulted?"

David glanced quickly at her. He would need to be careful. If she dug in her toes it would be a job to move her. He decided to take shelter behind the paternal authority, the only authority to which Mary ever paid the smallest attention.

"My dear," he said, "it doesn't rest with me, you know."

"Pig!" said Mary politely, and with insight. "You think that because Daddy's worried just now I won't go and rag him."

"I wouldn't, if I were you. You can go on ragging me, if it gives you any satisfaction."

"It doesn't. David, I want you to tell me the truth. Is Daddy sending me off because there's going to be trouble here?"

"That's putting it too strongly. Of course, if the Russians come back our position will be difficult."

"That from you means that there *is* danger. Don't you dear people understand that it's just the time when I *want* to be with you?"

"I know," admitted David, "but look at it the other way. There are two or three people here who, funnily enough, are rather fond of you. Suppose—it's only a wild possibility—we had a hard decision to make, we—Janplin in particular, of course—must be able to make it with a free mind."

"What sort of decision?"

"Say, to clear out of here at a few hours' notice for a really rough trek across to Persia; without proper transport, or arrangements, or anything."

"If you can do that, I can."

"Possibly you can. Point is that Janplin wouldn't enjoy exposing you to that sort of thing, and it's hardly fair to put him in that position."

Mary thought this over. "Oh dear," she said at last, with a little sigh, "I'm not much use to anybody, am I?"

"Bunkum! Having you here has made all the difference."

"I shall *hate* leaving, all the same. David, you'll look after Daddy and—and Aylmer, even if you don't like Aylmer frightfully. You're—such a rock."

"Old and nobbly. Thanks. I'll keep them out of mischief until I hand them over to you at Tehran."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

CHAPTER IV

PREPARATION

(1)

JANET, reconciled to her marching orders, betook herself at once to the discovery of Sogdiana. Morning and afternoon she set out, escorted by David, the little doctor, or Janplin himself, to wander through the alleys of the bazaars, so narrow, so dirty and so incredibly fascinating; to dodge into some arched doorway when, to accompanying cries of "Pusht!" the donkeys, with nostrils curiously slit, came stepping down the fairway; to haggle with the vendors of brassware or Bokharan hangings; to sniff the pungent scents, and, as she would remain alive, resist the allurements of the honeycakes and pistachio nuts, the roasted kabobs and sherbets, the bowls of curd and flaps of bread, the fruit jellies and candies of almond, piled high upon the stalls; to pause for a moment and watch, on the fringe of an intent circle, while Said Abud Mahomed matched his fighting quail against some rival from Kitab, or Rehim Bi Atalik, the fortune-teller from Tashkent, arranged the destiny of some gaping victim; to mix with the noisy, hurrying stream of pedestrians—the Turcoman in his red *khalat* and black busby, the Dervish with gaudy scarf and loincloth and ragged locks, the women in their loose black garments and linen veils, the Tajiks, the Sarts, the Kirghiz, the Uzbegs, the Jews—polyglot, polychrome and altogether Eastern—as they jostled and wrangled and bought and sold and occasionally paused, to spit conventionally, as the Unbelievers went by.

Again, there were the sights to be seen: the Great Square of the Three Mosques, whose tiled façades seemed to have caught something of the soft blue of the skies overhead; the poplar-fringed Gur Amir, where lies the body of great Tamerlane, that blind, lame, ugly, all-conquering Emperor; the Citadel that housed his successor Nasrullah, not blind or lame or all-conquering, but merely fat and rather stupid, who, after expressing a royal desire to be acquainted with the Gilchrist *Khanum*, was seized on her arrival with a royal attack of sulks; his *andarun*, more lively yet even more depressing, where the favoured ones plied their visitor with glasses of milkless tea and lemon ices and endless twittering questions about the ways of the West.

These spectacles must be described, on the return at evening, with the many absurd adventures that always befel Janet on her excursions, and the bargains that appeared so marvellous until Janplin, after inspection, grunted his damping "You've been done again, Janet." All this was as much in the tradition of former visits as was the fine weather, which Janet was reputed to bring with her and which was now filling the alleys of the city with pools of sunlight and drifts of brown slush. It was an interlude between storm and storm.

(2)

The little party at the Residency entered with spirit into the conspiracy. Never did Janplin, his cares for the moment pigeon-holed, play the host more delightfully. Never was there so entertaining a *raconteur* as Janet. Never was the little doctor more frankly ridiculous. It was, if you like, make-believe; as though the wind which had swept the skies clean of snow could scatter those other clouds that lowered on the Residency—the uncertainty of the future, the pain of parting, the threat of invasion. For the moment those things were set aside so that they might not spoil those last few days, and the evenings would pass in jest and

laughter and childish games, as the evenings of a week-end in an English country house.

There were times when an effort was needed and made. Anxious as Janet was to play her part in the kindly plot, the presence of Aylmer Custance was almost more than she could abide, and she swallowed many a tart retort that hovered on the tip of her tongue when that young man presumed to address her. To David the constraint of his new knowledge was less exacting. He had never been on terms of familiarity with Custance, so that his aloofness was unremarked. He too did his share, the more earnestly since it hurt him that once or twice, when Mary thought no one was watching her, he had surprised a look of fleeting unhappiness on her face.

Custance, indeed, had not a suspicion that his part in the affair of Eleanor Greatorex was known. How could it be, when he had been so careful, so discreet? Yet he too, though not always as successfully as the others, was smothering an obstinate depression. At one time, that Mary should be engaged to him had seemed unbelievable; and even now that she should marry him, a mirage. It was not so much that he feared a pale little ghost from his past, as that he had a vague foreboding of failure. A careerist through and through, it seemed to him that all his life he had just failed to arrive. At school, at Sandhurst, in the Army, he had done well, but not quite well enough. His achievement had lagged behind his ambition. Again and again he had had to tell himself that circumstances had fought against him; and it was in part this sense that the dice had always been loaded for his disappointment that made him a little ruthless in his relations with others. He was a man with a grievance.

During these last days yet another grievance was added to the tale. He saw so little of Mary. Sometimes, as he sat watching her smooth golden head, moving in quick, smiling turns from one speaker to another, and heard her low, rippling laugh, he

wondered angrily how deeply she felt the approaching separation, whether, indeed, he meant any more to her than did her father or these other friends. He wanted her—wanted her for himself, not to share with others, not merely as an agreeable companion; and in his moments of gloom he told himself that that was all he was to her. It was intolerable, when she was so much more than that to him. He found himself longing savagely for some event that might frustrate her journey, even if it brought danger to her. Anything was better than this separation, this one-sided bereavement.

"Mary," he broke out one day when for the moment they were alone, "I believe you don't mind going."

"You old silly," she had replied, "of course I mind. You must know how I hate leaving you all."

"That's just it," he had retorted, almost angrily.

"Aylmer dear, what *is* the matter?"

"Can't you forget the others for a little bit? Anyone would think we were not engaged, that I was no more to you than Faversham or the doctor or young Mansell."

Mary gave a little sigh. "You're a dreadfully jealous old thing, aren't you?" she said.

"You haven't answered me."

"Because it wasn't necessary. Aylmer, we can't—we mustn't—quarrel now, just before I go."

"I don't want to quarrel," he muttered. "It's—Mary, I never have you to myself now. There's always someone else. And if you only knew . . ."

Mary had melted at once, and made peace with the sacrifice of a precious afternoon's packing to a ride with Aylmer.

Afterwards, alone in her bedroom, she recalled his words. At the time she had put them aside, but now they pricked her memory. There was a discomforting grain of truth in them. Naturally, she minded most parting from Aylmer, but she also minded leaving the others—Daddy, David. . . . Was it really wrong not to forget them, not to forget everything except the

separation from Aylmer? Of *course* she loved Aylmer. A year ago, when he had brought his good looks and his gallant record to Sogdiana, Mary was little more than a child. She had known so few men—her father, David—dear, sober, dependable David—a casual visitor or two, an occasional subaltern like Freddy Mansell, and then—Aylmer. No one had ever made love to Mary before, and Aylmer, though she could not know it, was an expert. If in these last months she had sometimes shied away from his claims to a monopoly, his jealous moods and his sudden reproaches, her stubborn loyalty always brought her back to his side. And Aylmer the lover could always recover any ground that Aylmer the man might have lost.

And yet, and yet . . . A pity he was so silly—about David for instance; and David, though he never said a word to her, about Aylmer. Dears, both of them—especially David. Aylmer was a little too —too exciting to be a dear. You had to keep yourself all strung up with him, whereas with David you could just let yourself go and say what was in your mind. Aylmer was splendid, but he did not always understand. Perhaps it was that you had to fall in with his mood, while David—oh dear, there she was, making odious comparisons! She pulled a face at herself in the long glass. "Mary Plinn," she remarked sternly to her reflection, "you're a little pig and I'm ashamed of you."

(3)

On the evening of Friday, the day before the departure, Mary had a summons from her father. She found him standing by the steel safe in a corner of his room, that big, pleasant room with its crackling fire, its faint smell of tobacco and its happy associations.

"How's the packing, daughter?"

Mary settled herself by the fire. "Pretty hopeless," she answered. "Ayah's in a panic as usual; putting in all the wrong things and taking them out again." She looked up and smiled.

"Useless woman!" snorted Janplin.

"Oh, she tries. I'll make do somehow."

"Hm!" Janplin walked over to the fire and stood over Mary. She noticed that in one hand he held a little leather bag. "Like to look after something for me?" he asked abruptly.

"Of course. What is it?"

Janplin smiled and dangled the little wallet. "A King's ransom, or something near it. Not mine, but entrusted to me for safe-keeping. That good enough?"

"If you say so." She stretched out her hand and took it from him. It was a bag no larger than a sovereign purse. The opening had been sewn up, but inside she could feel something hard like a big pebble.

"What am I to do with it?"

"Take it with you. Don't lose it. Don't let it out of your reach. I'll claim it from you when I call for you at Tehran, unless in the meantime its rightful owner has come along."

"And who's that?"

"Fazz-ed-din."

Mary gave her father a startled look. "I see," she said slowly.

"Don't let anyone know you've got it. I shall tell Fazz-ed-din—and David, of course. Quite clear?"

Several questions were on the tip of Mary's tongue, but she kept them there. Janplin had a fierce dislike for curiosity, even when it was not purely idle.

"How's the young man?"

"Aylmer? Down in the mouth, poor darling. Daddy——"

"Yes."

"Why—why don't you like Aylmer?"

"I've never said I don't, have I?"

"No, but you don't—neither him nor our engagement. Own up, darling."

"I've nothing against him," said Janplin, "except a most egoistical notion that I can't quite see him as my son-in-law."

"Why not?"

Janplin paused. "I'm hanged if I know," he said slowly. "Probably because you've got an unreasonable old parent."

"Not usually."

"Well, I'm not going to play the heavy father, my dear. If, when we get back home, you still want your Aylmer, you shall have him. He's been pretty useful to me here, you know, though it's a pity he doesn't hit it off with David."

"It's not *all* Aylmer's fault."

"I daresay not; it's a pity, all the same. David's the world's worst window-dresser, but he has a heap of good points. Sort of fellow you can trust blind, eh? I'd like to feel that, if anything happened to me, you two weren't quite losing touch."

"Daddy, nothing's *going* to happen to you," she cried, leaning forward and catching at the rough sleeve of his coat. "Oh, Daddy, I think—I think——"

"Better think about finishing your packing," he said gruffly, but with a smile. "There"—he patted her cheek—"and when you've done that, think of the time we're going to have in England this summer."

"Stavrock," she whispered.

"And the trout rising in the Avon."

"And the cloisters on a sunny evening."

"Havilden Woods when the bluebells are out."

"And nice lazy cows, and nice lazy, Wiltshire voices. Oh, Daddy, what fun we'll have!"

With both her hands in his, Janplin pulled her to her feet, kissed her and pushed her doorwards. "Off with you, daughter!"

(4)

For three days David combed the city for camels, of which there was an unwonted scarcity, procuring in the end twelve beasts of reasonable quality at an unreasonable cost. He also collected an impressive pile of provisions for man and beast. He had arranged for one of Janplin's trusty retainers to accompany the

party as sergeant-major and dragoman, and had borrowed two of Mansell's Gurkhas for escort.

The little caravan made an early start on Saturday, so as to be clear of the city before the streets were filled with inquisitive people. The first white rays of the sun were touching the tree-tops in the big compound, the skies were steel-blue, and a frosty nip in the air was setting the camels grunting with impatience to be off. There was a bustle of people and packages up and down the verandah steps, and in a corner of the compound Janplin's Indian servants, muffled to the eyes, stood waiting to see the Missy-Sahib go off.

The last load had been hooked on, and the last subdued good-byes were being said. Janet distributed a word and a handshake all round.

"You'll find the route all right," said Janplin in a matter-of-fact voice. "Remember me to the Bradwardines."

"Look after yourself, Johnnie," she muttered in reply; then stalked off down the steps, cast an expert eye over her caravan, and bestrode her crouching camel.

Mary came out, followed by Aylmer; they had had their leave-taking indoors. Very small she looked, in her sheepskin coat, with her face peeping out of her furs, and a stray curl or two escaped from her Astrakhan cap. There had been tears, perhaps, not very far from those blue eyes, but on the verandah she was Janplin's daughter again. She went to her father and kissed him.

"Good-bye, Daddy."

"Good-bye, my dear. See you in Tehran."

That was all.

There was a joke to be exchanged with the doctor, and a smiling handshake for Freddy Mansell. Then it was David's turn.

"Remember," she said under her breath, as she took his hand.

"My promise? Of course. Don't worry, my dear. Good-bye."

She turned and went quickly down the steps.

David stood, a little apart, and watched. The

camelmen were beginning to exhort their charges, the camels were baring their teeth and snarling, the little doctor was running round and getting in everyone's way. "Rather you than me," he was saying to Mary. "Camels always make me seasick. Ah, would you, you nasty beast?" He jumped hastily aside as two rows of yellow teeth snapped round at him. Mansell had vanished indoors, to reappear with a tray of glasses of cherry brandy, which he pressed on the assembly. Janplin took a glass and toasted the caravan with the ghost of a smile on his lips. There was more shouting and grunting and roaring, as the camels clumsily heaved themselves up. Mansell and the doctor raised a cheer; Janet, strangely dignified for all her queer clothes and short grizzled locks, gave a nod and a wave of her hand; and Mary turned and looked back at Aylmer.

As the camels filed slowly off down the wide approach to the Main Gate, Mary turned again to acknowledge the salaams of the staff. There was the spindle-legged gardener with his waterskin, and Jhotun Singh, the bearded khansamah, and stupid old ayah, weeping noisily; and behind them the long, white, two-storied building, with those still, watching figures on the verandah. She gave a little sob of pain at the thought of all she was leaving . . . Aylmer, Daddy, David. They were to stay to meet that vague menace from the North, while she fled like a rotten little deserter. A mist of tears was over her eyes, but she straightened herself to pass the saluting Gurkha at the Main Gate. The caravan swung out into the square, almost empty at this hour, with the clean sunshine striking the houses and the dirty heaps of thawing snow. It wheeled to the right towards the Merv gate of the city and took the road to the Persian hills.

. . . . . .

"I say," said Freddy Mansell suddenly, as much to himself as to Custance, when the tail of the last camel had disappeared, "I'm jolly thankful *she's* out of this."

Custance swore softly and turned on his heel.

CHAPTER V

THE MUTTER OF DRUMS

(1)

ON Sunday evening, shortly after dark, a stout citizen, swathed mummy-like in wraps, waddled as fast as his fat legs could carry him across the Square in front of the old Russian Residency. As he passed the Main Gate, he gave a swift, furtive look behind him and dived for the entrance. A bayonet, a couple of inches from his paunch, halted him so suddenly that he nearly overbalanced and fell. He had expected to be challenged, though not so abruptly, and the proximity of cold steel, always unpleasant, was particularly upsetting just at the moment; so that the hand which held out a private pass, signed by Major Faversham in favour of one Moula Buksh, quivered like a slab of jelly. The Gurkha stood aside, and the stealthy visitor melted into the bushes that flanked the wide approach.

He was inside. What next? Had this been an ordinary visit, Moula would have sought out Jhotun Singh or Saiyed Nur Mahomed, and made his presence known. Then, after a little bazaar talk in the godowns, he would have been taken to the Major Sahib. But to-night care was necessary. The sentry did not matter, for he was a Gurkha, and the Gurkhas were incurious folk who kept to themselves. But the servants must not see him. He knew those servants, Indians like himself, chattering, gossip-loving creatures. If they caught sight of him, by morning his visit to the Major Sahib would be the talk of the town. Therefore

he must, if possible, disclose his presence unobtrusively. That might be difficult, he thought, as he dodged clumsily among the trees, making his way deviously towards the big house. Still, he knew which was the window of the Major Sahib's office: he would creep up to it and gently tap.

But at the verandah steps he stopped in dismay. There was the window, sure enough, but it was a black oblong against the light plaster of the wall. The room was unlit and probably empty. He had not expected that, for, native-like, he had assumed that a man would keep to his quarters after dark, save in an emergency such as his own. What was he to do now? He surveyed the long row of windows in some perplexity. Wait! At the end of the verandah some thin bars of light lay across the floor, as though projected through the chinks of a badly shuttered window. Whipping off his slippers Moula stole barefoot over the tiles. Undoubtedly there was a light in the room, and although the shutters were nearly closed, so that he could not see inside, the window—after the foolish habit of the English—was open, and he could hear sounds of conversation.

Now Moula was a gentleman who would have been very surprised to learn that in some circles eavesdropping is regarded with disfavour. Indeed, he owed much of the success of a varied career to the fact that he never saw a keyhole, so to speak, without putting an ear to it. So directly he discovered that people were talking behind those shutters, his natural instinct was to lie very low and try to hear what they were talking about.

At once he identified one of the voices as Faversham's: the other was unfamiliar. He found it hard at first to distinguish the words, but in a moment or two his ear picked up the range.

"——row if it's discovered," Faversham was saying.

"There would be," replied the other voice. "It's not so much its value as its associations. The people

are crazy about it; don't think an Emir's *pukka* unless he has it."

Moula pricked up his ears. This was interesting, if a little obscure.

"But why on earth," inquired Faversham's voice, "doesn't Fazz-ed-din take charge of it himself?"

"Our friend Fazz-ed-din is a complex character. I fancy he's afraid that if he disappears with it everybody will draw an obvious conclusion, and his chance of again becoming a popular figure in Sogdiana will go. Possibly it's also at the back of his mind that he may have a rough passage out of the country, and the less he carries with him that's worth robbing, the more likely he will be to get off with a whole skin. And a third reason is, that he doesn't trust the guards at the Citadel: they might take it into their heads that the cat was going to jump on the Russian side, and jump first, before he had time to carry out his plans."

"I never quite follow Fazz-ed-din's mental processes. Where are you keeping the thing?"

"I haven't got it. Fact is, David, I'm not giving much for the army's chances, and if the Russians get through, it's no safer here than in the Citadel. I gave it to Mary."

Moula heard an exclamation of astonishment from Faversham.

"After all," the strange voice went on, "no one knows the child has got it, and she can be trusted to keep her mouth shut. Think I was wrong?"

"I don't know," came slowly from Faversham. "I must say I don't quite like Mary being mixed up in the business."

"I'm not sure that I do, particularly, either; but I don't see what harm can come of it to her. Well, I've some work to finish off before I turn in. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

A door opened and shut, and there was silence.

(2)

Moula lay on his stomach, his brain busily at work. Now, what was all this about? What was this " thing " of which they spoke? It was something small, something valuable, something important, something indispensable to an Emir of Sogdiana—Moula's mind, in recalling this last attribute, gave a sharp click and registered the answer to the riddle set it. So that was what it was, what it must be. His body shook with a fat, silent chuckle. Fazz-ed-din had stolen " it " and, like a fool, had passed " it " on to Janplin. And Janplin had entrusted " it " to the Miss Sahib with very fair hair and very blue eyes whom he (Moula) had seen once or twice out riding. By now " it " was well on the way to Persia, where, sooner or later, Janplin would arrive to retrieve " it." That Fazz-ed-din would ever set eyes on " it " again was a possibility that only entered Moula's mind to be dismissed. The business was as clear as the noonday, and the more he considered it the higher rose his respect for Janplin. There was a man for you, to dupe an old fox like Fazz-ed-din! Decidedly his favour and protection must be secured, for so subtle and wily a schemer would surely triumph over his enemies. Janplin's reason for confiding in the Major Sahib was the only obscure point remaining; but possibly gossip lied and it was this Major Sahib and not the tall dark one who was the young woman's betrothed. If so, the puzzle vanished. But where, in all this, did Moula Buksh come in? Somewhere, surely, for such a secret must carry a solid financial value. It might be no business of his, yet it was the kind of titbit which an astute Hindu gentleman would do well to store away in his capacious memory. Meanwhile, his errand was still undischarged. Cautiously, he allowed a full five minutes to elapse before he tapped gently at the window pane. The curtain was pulled sharply aside.

"Who's that? Ah, Moula Buksh."

David opened the window wider, and Moula, not without difficulty, squeezed his way into the room.

"How long have you been there?" demanded David in Hindustani.

"Huzoor, I have but just arrived," panted Moula, as one who had been hurrying hotfoot. "I made all speed to come to your Excellency."

"Have you brought news?"

Moula bowed. "My messenger returned this evening. Sahib, there has been a battle. The army of His Highness the Emir has been utterly overthrown."

"Wait here," commanded David. He left the room, returning in a moment with Janplin, who gave Moula a keen look and commanded him to tell his story.

Moula obeyed. His news, allowing for a little exaggeration, was as bad as it could well be. The Emir's army had run into a strong Russian force, had broken at the first clash, and was now in flight for the city. The first fugitives might be expected within twenty-four hours, the Russians, pursuing at a more leisurely rate, a couple of days later. "Tuesday," thought David. "A clear start of three days for Janet. Ought to be enough."

Moula, having completed his task, began to broach his own troubles. What was to happen to him when the Russians arrived? He put his case volubly, ignoring the obvious preoccupation of both Englishmen.

It was Janplin who first heeded his babblings.

"Eh, what's that?" he said sharply. "David, you had better settle with this fellow and send him off."

Moula stretched out a pair of flabby, imploring hands

"Then am I already a dead man," he pleaded. "Has not Ogdai Khan the Uzbeg let it be known that if I try to leave this accursed city I shall be followed and hewn in pieces? And if I stay—aie, aie," he wailed.

"Stop that," said Janplin. "What do you want?"

"To rest in your Excellency's protecting shadow."

Janplin turned to David. "If we start that sort of

thing," he said, "we shall have half the population storming the Residency for shelter."

"I swear on my head that none shall hear," insisted Moula, who understood English very well. "I shall return with a few poor possessions before daylight. Ah, Huzoor, do not refuse me! It is known that I have given information to the Major Sahib, and when the Russians come——" His voice quavered away. "Here alone I shall be safe," he concluded.

"Hm," grunted Janplin; "I'm not so sure. But if it's like that, Moula Buksh, you can take your chance with us."

Moula called forth blessings on his benefactor and squeezed himself back through the window.

The two Englishmen smiled at each other.

"We seem to have a little prestige left," said Janplin grimly. "David, cut away to the palace by the garden gate and pass the news on to Fazz-ed-din. I'll wait up till you come back."

. . . . . .

David returned in half an hour. "Fazz-ed-din has gone," he reported.

Janplin gave a low whistle. "Quick work," he commented. "Believes in going while the going's good. Well, he's wise by his lights, I suppose."

"And now?" asked David.

Janplin picked up the hurricane lamp that David had brought in. "Bed," he said tersely.

CHAPTER VI

SUSPENSE

(1)

ON the Sunday morning rumour swept the city like a forest fire. A Russian army of fabulous strength was marching on Sogdiana. Fazz-ed-din was dead. So was the Emir. Janplin had fled, disguised as a woman (the departure of Janet was behind that story). There was to be a massacre and a great looting. As the reports flew from mouth to mouth and from house to house, the many bad characters began secretly to foregather and form their plans, while the respectable citizens crouched behind their shuttered windows. Suspense hung over the city like a sword. Everybody was waiting, for what they scarcely knew.

At ten o'clock, in brilliant sunshine, two men rode at leisurely pace through the bazaar, their horses' hoofs striking echoes in the almost empty streets and bringing people furtively to their windows. The first horseman was Janplin, riding as was his custom with a slack rein and long stirrups, tapping his boot with a light switch and smoking a cigarette. Behind him rode a stolid orderly; while his long dog, Selim, loped alongside, running now and then to poke his lean nose into some savoury smell, sometimes cantering ahead, sometimes dallying behind in the sunshine, and treating with an equal lordly contempt the shy advances and snarling outcries of the scavenging dogs.

Through a city which had become a vast whispering gallery, Janplin rode slowly, regardless of the hundreds of hidden eyes that watched him, or of the busy tongues that broke into comment as he passed.

So it was a lie that he had fled, they murmured. What a man he was, to go out, apparently unarmed, as though this were an ordinary morning! A fine day for a ride indeed! It was said that the dreaded swordsmen from Bokhara were already at the gate. It was said that trouble had begun in the Lower Bazaar. It was said that Hadji Awad, holiest of *imams*, had proclaimed death for all Unbelievers. It was said . . . it was said . . .

Meanwhile that tall figure, with his servant and his dog, rode on and on, unhurried, unperturbed, unmolested. It was astonishing. Very soon the bad characters began to tell each other that it would be wise to wait awhile before moving, since certainly this man, this devil, this Janplin, must have received some later information, or he would hardly venture so boldly into the streets; while the respectable citizens began to take heart and murmur that after all matters could not be so serious as they had feared.

That morning, while Janplin held the city in leash, David was busy collecting a demoralised police force and coaxing or kicking them back to their duty. It was no easy task, but by midday he had got together a couple of hundred men, and through divers channels the word was going round that there was to be no trouble just yet. Presently, no doubt, the Russians would arrive and there would be changes; but for the moment Janplin's writ was to run in Sogdiana.

And run it did, save that in the early afternoon there was a sudden flare-up in the Lower Bazaar. Before David could hurry a squad of men to the scene, there were a couple of corpses on the cobbles; and Moula Buksh, safe within the Residency walls, watched a coil of smoke mount skywards from the quarter where his house lay. However, he drew comfort from the thought that he might have been worse off. There he was, in a haven of refuge, with his papers and his valuables and the only wife worth rescuing. This time Ogdai Khan might whistle for his revenge.

(2)

His Highness the Emir had eaten heartily at midday and lay asleep on the cushions, close to the brazier, in his big apartment. He had taken a little opium after his meal, so that his sleep was heavy; but at three o'clock or thereabouts he grunted, rolled over, sat up and rubbed his eyes.

At once he remembered his grievance. That morning he had sent for Fazz-ed-din, and the man had never come. Ordinarily this would not have troubled him, but ordinarily he would never have sent for a man he disliked so much. To-day he had braced himself for an interview; he must discover what was happening. No one had told him any news for days, and, like others in Sogdiana, he was finding the suspense intolerable. What had happened to the army—his army? Where was that young cub Daoud, whom he had not seen for a fortnight? Were the Russians coming or not? And if they were, what was to become of His Highness the Emir? All these questions had been painfully revolved in a brain fuddled by opium and softened by easy living. When Fazz-ed-din arrived he, the Emir, would insist upon a plain answer. He would be very firm and astute and dignified. But Fazz-ed-din had not come. Two messengers had been sent off: the first had returned with an assurance that the Prime Minister would be in attendance shortly; the second had not returned at all. It was very annoying, and of a piece with the man's insolence that he should calmly ignore such a summons. The Emir lay back on his cushions, fashioning barbed sentences for use when Fazz-ed-din should at last appear.

Surely the room was very cold. He looked at the brazier and uttered an angry exclamation. The fire was out, the charcoal burnt to a handful of white ashes. What were his slaves about? Of what was Mir Ma'sum the eunuch, the only servant he could trust even a little, thinking? Petulantly he clapped his

hands. Nothing happened. He clapped them again. Still no one appeared.

This was too much. The lazy dogs were all asleep. He would have them soundly whipped—by Allah, he would! He called once, twice and a third time; and then, cursing feebly, he levered himself out of his cushions and lumbered off to the anteroom. Here by rights two slaves should have been awaiting his pleasure. They would have fallen asleep, and he promised himself that he would play a favourite trick on them; he would pick a couple of live coals from the brazier—*their* fire, you might be sure, would be burning merrily—and drop them on an exposed part of the sleepers' persons. That would teach them to keep awake.

But the anteroom was empty. The Emir's first sensation was anger; his next, following hard upon it, fear. Not only was the room empty, but it had been empty for some hours. The brazier, like his, was cold. The men were gone. Why?

He stood for a moment, grappling with this thought, and a little prickling sweat broke over him. He was not accustomed to be alone. He shambled to the door and looked out into the long corridor. There was no one there. In a sudden panic he began to call his servants by name—"Mir Ma'sum! Said! Malek! Abu'l Faiz!" His cries came back to him in horrid echoes, presently to fade into an even more horrid silence. He gave a little sob of fear and shuffled down the corridor. He must find Mir Ma'sum. Mir Ma'sum would tell him what had happened.

When he had gone a little way, he found Mir Ma'sum; or rather, as he turned a corner, he stumbled over something in the dim light. It was Mir Ma'sum, stabbed through the heart, stone dead, sprawling grotesquely on the tiles.

The Emir's cry ended in a gasp, and panic swept over him like a breaching sea; so that was how it was. They had murdered Mir Ma'sum. In a little while they would come back and it would be his turn. Just

so had died his grandfather, Ibn Hankal; first the servants had fled, and then the murderers had crept in on him with their knives and despatched him in his sleep.

For a moment the Emir stood, shaking and sweating, paralysed with terror like a rabbit hunted by a stoat. Then he ran aimlessly, up and down the dark corridor; and each time, as he passed the body, he stumbled over it and nearly fell. What was he to do? Where was he to go? At this very moment, perhaps, the murderers were stealing into the palace. Very soon he would hear their quiet footsteps drawing nearer and nearer. They would hunt him from room to room, and in the end they would catch him. . . .

Then to his terror-driven mind came a glimmer of hope. Janplin! He would escape through the palace garden and into the Residency by the little door. Janplin would save him. Janplin was great and good and powerful. Janplin would not allow him to be murdered. So, all at once, Janplin, whom he had cursed so heartily and hated so cordially, appeared in the shining apparel of a deliverer. Yes, he must go, and at once . . . if already it was not too late.

He blundered down the corridor and out on to a verandah. Here for a moment he cowered, shrinking before the glare of sunlight and the open spaces of the garden. He would be seen, followed; he would never reach the gate. Then—perhaps fear quickened his imagination—he thought he heard a footfall in the palace behind. With a moan he plunged down the steps and hurried across the garden, a strange, mountainous figure, lurching and stumbling and swaying. He dared not even look over his shoulder for fear of what he might see. In his haste he lost a slipper, but would not stop to retrieve it. Once he tripped over a little aqueduct and fell sprawling; and lay for a minute, babbling piteously as though he had been felled by an enemy. Then he scrambled up and hurried on. He was gasping for breath, for never, since his boyhood,

had he run as he was running now. His feet were bleeding; his clothing was torn; he was almost blinded by sweat and the tears that coursed uncontrollably down his fat cheeks.

There, at last, was the door. He staggered up to it. It was shut. In a last frenzy he flung himself on it, beating it with his great soft hands, sobbing and panting with exhaustion and despair. Dimly he heard voices on the other side. The door opened and he fell forward headlong, at the feet of two astonished little men in khaki; and there he lay, a heaving, inert mass.

"Who is this fat man who comes so suddenly?" asked one Gurkha of his comrade.

"I know not," replied the other, scratching his head. And then, with a sudden inspiration, "But let us inform the Jemadar, who will doubtless summon Mansell Sahib."

The Jemadar, when fetched, viewed the body with disgust and spat on the ground. "It is that fat pig of an Emir," he announced. "We will carry him to the guardroom."

"Wah, but he is heavy," they gasped to each other, as they struggled along with their burden.

(3)

On Monday the army began to straggle in. They had marched off gallantly enough in sections of fours, but they came home by twos and threes, with scarcely a kick among them. Their boots—an old weakness with army contractors—must have been compounded of string and blotting-paper, and of not too much of either; their rifles had long been discarded as encumbrances to gentlemen in a hurry; and their equipment and uniforms were greatly the worse for their three weeks' campaigning. Not that this last deficiency mattered much, for on nearing the city they were careful to rid themselves of as much of their military trappings as could conveniently be discarded; so that,

on arrival, they might melt inconspicuously into the population and resume the life of civilians. All that afternoon they streamed back into the city in little footsore, dejected squads.

"There'll be trouble to-night, sir," remarked Custance, who from the flat Residency roof was watching the return of the army in company with Janplin.

The latter lowered his field-glasses and shook his head. "Not to-night," he said. "I fancy those fellows are too sick and sorry to start a row before they've had a rest. To-morrow perhaps."

"To-morrow the Russians should be here," muttered Custance.

Janplin nodded. Indeed, the Russian cavalry might have reached Sogdiana already, but they were evidently in no hurry. Probably they had sized up the situation. They had nothing to fear from the remnant of the Emir's army, and on the approach of the invaders the capital would fall like a ripe plum into their mouths. A little disturbance in the city before their arrival would be rather welcomed than otherwise; it would afford ample excuse, were any needed, for punitive measures, and might solve the problem of that inconvenient British Mission. With a word to Custance about the protection of the Residency, which was in his charge, Janplin went down to receive David's report on his police work.

CHAPTER VII

ARRIVAL

(1)

RIFLEMAN KO PANGI, as it happened, was again on sentry duty at the Main Gate of the Residency when on Tuesday morning the advanced guard of the victorious army rode into a quiet city. The inhabitants had gone to ground, and the Great Square was empty. Only that sturdy khaki figure stood at the gate and slapped his rifle butt in a salute when the leading horsemen appeared; as though the arrival of a Russian army were an everyday occurrence. He stood and watched curiously, while shaggy men on shaggy little ponies, hung about with rifles and cooking-pots and odds and ends of loot, went by. To the horsemen there was something about Ko Pangi to tickle their sense of humour, and as they rode past they flung their jests at him in a round dozen languages, none of which he understood. At first he took their remarks in good part, mistaking them for salutations such as might properly be paid to a soldier of Nepal. But at last, as the grins broadened and the laughter rose and fell, he began to have his suspicions. Could it be . . . was it possible that these men were mocking him? His good-tempered face set in a fierce frown, whereat the merriment waxed louder. Ko Pangi began to get very angry.

At length one loud-voiced, impudent fellow, by way of indicating the approaching fate of the British Mission, craned forward his neck towards the little Gurkha and drew his forefinger sharply across his throat from ear to ear.

This was too much. Ko Pangi forgot his dignity, his discipline and the Jemadar in the guardroom. Clutching his rifle in one hand, with the other he drew his *kukri* and gave a swift demonstration in pantomime of the way in which a Gurkha disembowels a goat. So dramatic was his gesture, and so pregnant the nod which accompanied it, that none could mistake his meaning. Imagine, then, his indignation when the laughter, so far from being quelled, crackled down the column like a *feu de joie*, the riders rolling in their saddles and smacking their thighs in delight at so great a jest from so small a man.

What Ko Pangi would have done next it is hard to say; possibly he would have treated one of his tormentors as he had just treated the imaginary goat; but fortunately for the city's peace the Jemadar had observed the lapse and shot out of the guardroom with a scandalised cry. And Ko Pangi, his honour unsatisfied, found himself in deep disgrace.

(2)

"So that's that," remarked David cheerfully the next morning, as he finished his account of how, on the arrival of the Russians, he had tactfully effaced himself from the police office.

"And what next?" inquired Custance. It was odd that, with Mary's departure, he found himself less hostile to David. He had to admit the man's competence, however grudging his admiration, and perhaps during the last few days he had been too busy to brood; or perhaps it was that they were all in the same hole together.

Janplin shrugged his shoulders. "In the best stations," he observed, "the new-comer calls first. We must assume that General Kossoutoff knows his etiquette book."

"Kossoutoff?" replied David. "He's certainly the figurehead, but unless rumour is all wrong the man we have to reckon with is Bukholin."

"The fellow who shot up Bokhara? If he's with 'em, the fur will fly."

"He's with them all right," said David. "The Emir's a bit of a complication, sir."

"He is," agreed Janplin. "I could wish that fat waster anywhere but here. In fact, if he hadn't arrived in such a lather of fright I'd half suspect him of bolting in just to annoy us. However, here he is, and here, I suppose, he stays."

"I wouldn't give a farthing for his chances outside," said Custance, who had strolled to the window. "Hullo, this must be the party come to drop a card on us, sir."

It was the Russians. David, peeping discreetly from the side of the window, saw a little procession approaching the verandah steps. The first man, short and plump, sallow of complexion, and wearing a neat but shabby uniform, was obviously General Kossoutoff, the Commander-in-Chief and by report a cipher. It was the man who was walking with slightly mincing steps behind the General who next drew David's attention. At first sight he set him down as the complete dandy, with his waisted greatcoat and his high, polished boots; his jaunty fur cap, his silver spurs and his smart ebony cane. Yet there was an awkwardness in his carriage, and David, as he looked, realised that this could be none other than Bukholin, the hunchback Commissar, so sensitive about his weakness that he spared no pains to conceal it, so careful of his appearance that the fame of his turn-out had filtered through into the bazaars of Sogdiana. Other stories, less harmless, had also filtered through, and some of these David now recalled; how the man had turned Bokhara into a shambles; how in Samarkand he had driven the heads of the opposition into the Citadel and slaughtered them in cold blood; how earlier, in Russia, this strange figure, with narrow, impassive face, eyes like slots and mouth drawn to a thin gash, had practised cruelties as ingenious as any devised by the traditional Chinese torturer. Now, as Commissar attached to the Russian

forces in Central Asia, he was the real power in the land. Kossoutoff might have his way on a purely military decision, but in everything else Bukholin was the master.

At the moment he was mounting the verandah steps in the General's wake, his face set stiffly to his front, in contrast with the three or four officers who followed and who were gazing about them with undisguised curiosity.

When, a couple of minutes later, the visitors were shown in, David was able to study Bukholin more closely. He saw that the man, not content with his naturally grotesque appearance, had dressed his face like a courtesan. It was a mask of powder, with a spot of red on either cheek that gave him a curious resemblance to a Dutch doll. Moreover, his person exuded a faint smell of stale scent. The effect was most unpleasant. The man was corrupt, an abomination from whom any decent person might well turn in disgust.

The interview began quietly enough with some stiff but polite greetings in broken English from Kossoutoff, who obviously exhausted his entire vocabulary in the first minute. Then Bukholin took his turn. He spoke in a queer, low-pitched voice that now purred in contentment, now spat in emphasis; but whatever the purport of his words, his face remained utterly without expression behind its white mask. He hinted his surprise at finding a British Mission installed not merely in Sogdiana, but actually in the old Russian Residency.

"We came," Janplin reminded him, "on the invitation of the *de facto* Government of that date of Russia in Asia."

"Ah, Koltchak!" murmured Bukholin with the faintest of sneers.

Janplin added that to the best of his belief the Soviet Government had never protested against the presence of the Mission. But the situation, Bukholin suggested, was a little different now. Janplin agreed. The future (if any) of the British Mission would need to be settled between Moscow and London.

"Moscow!" exclaimed Bukholin in affected sur-

prise. It was nothing to do with Moscow, he asserted; it was the business of the newly-proclaimed Soviet Government of Sogdiana. Russia was merely the friend, the ally, the honest broker; her work completed, she would tactfully efface herself.

Up went Janplin's eyebrows at this audacious subterfuge. So that was the game—to shift responsibility for untoward happenings from Moscow, which could be brought to some sort of account, to an inaccessible puppet government in Sogdiana. Diplomatically, Janplin hinted that he thought this a little thin. The point would be referred to Delhi as soon as the passes were open. In the meantime——

"In the meantime," purred Bukholin, "I hope, Sir John, that you will continue to enjoy such poor hospitality as Russia is able to afford by remaining in occupation of the Residency."

Janplin inwardly confounded the fellow's cheek and gave him a formal little bow.

That seemed to end the business. David was puzzled. He had expected a less conciliatory attitude; the demeanour of the Russians, though impudent, was not hostile. He did not like it. Bukholin, unless rumour lied, was a man who never acted without a motive; who, if he murdered, murdered in the way of business; who had no loves and no hates, playing the game of politics with a single eye and, perhaps for that reason, with great success. That he now proposed to tolerate the nuisance of a British Mission for a month or more, while instructions were on the way from Delhi, was scarcely credible. Obviously he must have a card up his sleeve which he had not yet disclosed. But what was this he was saying?

"There is a small point on which the newly-established Soviet of Sogdiana has desired me to make representations to your Excellency." Bukholin's voice was soft as silk. "It is reported that the ex-Emir has taken shelter in the Residency."

Janplin nodded. "His Highness came here yesterday," he said.

"Quite so. The Soviet finds itself under the regrettable necessity of asking your Excellency to hand over the person of the ex-Emir, so that he may stand his trial on certain charges in connection with the late revolutionary government."

Janplin digested this for a moment. "You are surely aware, Monsieur Bukholin," he said quietly, "that it is impossible for me to accede to such a request. I will not argue with you whether the late Government was revolutionary, as you state, or properly constituted, as I believe. I shall merely point out that I have full diplomatic privileges, that the Residency is consequently extra-territorial ground, and that His Highness, so long as he remains here, is under the protection of the British flag."

"So long as he remains here," remarked Bukholin meaningly.

"I cannot insist on his departure," retorted Janplin, "unless I am instructed to do so by my Government."

"I deplore the decision," said Bukholin, rising. "Your Excellency must be aware that there is considerable feeling against the Emir in the city, and also, if I may be pardoned for saying so, against yourself. When the people hear that you are denying them justice, they may take the law into their own hands."

"Presumably," said Janplin stiffly, "your troops can maintain order."

"Pardon me. The troops under the command of General Kossoutoff can scarcely interfere in the affairs of a friendly State——"

"You surprise me," murmured Janplin.

"—— And for the conduct of the Red Army of Sogdiana we can give no guarantee and can accept no responsibility. I must make this clear in case a regrettable incident should occur." He turned as though to leave.

"One moment," said Janplin, in a voice that halted Bukholin. "I will speak plainly. You talk of feeling in the city against the Emir and myself. That is not true. There is—or was yesterday—no such feeling

except among a minority of bad characters. You say that your troops cannot interfere. That also is not true. You have already interfered so far as to overthrow the existing Government. Finally, you disclaim responsibility for anything that may happen. Permit me to warn you that if any hostile movement is made against this Mission, the British Government will hold your Government at Moscow to a strict account."

A faint sneer crept again into Bukholin's voice. "I advise you to reconsider your decision, Sir John," he said. "England is a long way off."

"England has a long arm," retorted Janplin sternly.

"And a short memory," added Bukholin. "Come, Sir John, it would be more pleasant if you handed the man over. He shall have a fair trial."

"I am afraid we might differ on what constitutes a fair trial. No, Monsieur Bukholin, for the present the Emir remains."

The Russian shrugged his shoulders. "As you will," he said. "I have the honour to wish your Excellency good-morning." He moved to the door.

General Kossoutoff, who had obviously failed to follow the trend of the conversation, smiled agreeably, clicked his heels and gave a jerky little bow. He and his staff then clanked out of the room after the Commissar.

(3)

"Phew," said Janplin, "open that window a little wider, Custance. I hate a man who uses cheap scent."

Custance pushed at the window as though it were the departed Commissar's face. "It looks," he said, savagely, "as though that fat fool of an Emir is going to cook our goose."

Janplin shook his head. "I think not," he replied. "The Emir's only a stalking horse. What do you say, David?"

"I'm sure of it," David replied. "That man meant

to quarrel with us. If we gave him the Emir with our blessing, he'd soon find another bone to pick."

Janplin nodded. "Quite an astute move, all the same. Either we refuse, and he raises the city against us; or we agree, and bang goes what is left of our prestige. You'd better get on with the programme, Custance. David, I want a word with you."

After Aylmer's departure Janplin stood silently for a moment, filling a pipe and frowning.

"You realise what this means?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. We're for it. I don't suppose there was ever any way out, once the army crashed. Sorry, Chief."

Janplin had been pacing the room. Now he stopped and fixed David with a fierce stare, pointing his unlit pipe at him. "Am I an obstinate old fool?" he demanded roughly. "Ought I to hand over the Emir, to walk out of the Residency, to make what terms I can? The lives of sixty people hang on it, David. Have I any right to throw them away?"

"I don't know about 'right,'" said David slowly, "but—it's infernal cheek of me to say it—you've got your duty. You won't be doing it, to my mind, if you hand over the Emir and clear out. While as for making terms, a scrap of paper would be an Act of Parliament beside any bargain we might drive with these people. It don't matter much whether our throats are cut here or a mile or so outside the city, except that by sticking on we keep our *izzat*."

Janplin's sombre face lit up with a smile.

"You're a satisfactory adviser, David," he answered. "You nearly always say what I want to hear. Well, now that I've had your free opinion on the first point, I'll move on to the next. You must leave at once."

David stared at him. "I—leave?" he stammered.

"To-night," said Janplin. "For Persia. Unless we're all out in our reckoning, there's trouble coming. To-morrow, the day after—who knows? But it's coming just as quickly as Bukholin can organise it. So we've no time to lose. You will take with you certain papers which I don't want to have to burn.

When you reach the Persian border, make straight for Tehran. From there you can talk to Delhi by wireless. I doubt if they'll be in time to do anything, and I don't somehow see an Expeditionary Force marching into Central Asia. Still, it's a bare chance, and they can always make a rumpus with Moscow and threaten reprisals and so on."

"But you—you——" stammered David.

"For the last two days Custance and Mansell have been fortifying the place. I've seen positions I liked better, but it's wonderful what sandbags and barbed wire will do. I fancy the proletariat will get a nasty surprise when it comes to fetch its Emir. We've got lots of food and our own water supply; I should say we could break up any ordinary rush, unless——"

"The guns," cried David. "The Russian guns."

"Exactly. But they can't use the guns without the gunners, and where's Russian neutrality then?"

"They'll do it, all the same."

"Perhaps," agreed Janplin, who knew how little "perhaps" there was about it. "But I think they'll stay aloof at first, let the locals pick out the chestnuts, while they watch the fire as neutrals—very benevolent neutrals."

"Chief," pleaded David hoarsely, "for God's sake don't send me away. Send Custance, Mansell, anyone. My place is here—with you."

"Your place," corrected Janplin, "is where I send you. Custance can't speak the language; nor can the boy. Neither of 'em would get twenty miles from Sogdiana. And don't you flatter yourself that your journey will be all jam. Three days ago the plain was as quiet as a meeting of the Parish Council; but now the country's up, and you'll have to run the gauntlet of some of the worst budmashes in Central Asia."

"All the same, I wish to God you'd let me stay," muttered David.

"That's enough," said Janplin quietly and not unkindly; and David knew that it was.

CHAPTER VIII

"THE TOPMOST ROOF"

(1)

DAVID took a sick heart to his hasty preparations. As he collected a meagre kit and burned or set aside papers, the thought kept pricking him that in the hour of danger he was to leave Janplin—Janplin whom he had served through the ups and downs of ten years. The perils of the coming journey scarcely consoled him. He was to travel in native dress, which he had worn on previous missions of a secret character; he was to take with him Hari Singh, a retainer of Janplin's, once a robber but latterly a more or less reformed character, who knew something of the country and its people; and the start was to be made as soon as it was dark.

Coming out of his office with an armful of papers, he ran into Custance, who stopped short on seeing him.

"Janplin says you're clearing out to-night," began Aylmer in a constrained voice. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"Tehran."

Custance opened his mouth again and shut it, as though swallowing some further question. He stood aside to let David pass, and then called after him: "You might take a letter for me."

"Certainly," answered David.

Had his eyes not been fixed on the precarious pile of papers he was carrying, he could hardly have failed

to see that Aylmer's face was black with anger. When, ten minutes earlier, Janplin had casually remarked, "Oh, by the way, Custance, I'm sending Faversham off to-night," Aylmer had been too surprised to utter a word. To him no more than to David had such a possibility occurred, and, as the first shock passed, rancour and bitterness beset him like a returning fever. He told himself that this was a plot. He was to remain, probably to die, in Sogdiana, while Faversham, in the security of Tehran, with Mary . . . and at the thought of what might happen at Tehran Aylmer cursed impotently between his clenched teeth. Of course Faversham had worked it with Janplin; and Janplin, who always favoured the fellow, had met him more than half-way. So between them they had decided that now, when the trap was set, Custance should stay, caught in its fangs, and Faversham should go free.

So, his judgment warped by jealousy, Aylmer twisted the facts round and round, beating with his fists on the table with helpless fury. That coward, that rat, to quit at the danger-signal! An hour earlier he, Aylmer, had been content to stay and to accept whatever fate might befall him. But then he had thought it was to be the common fate, shared by them all; whereas now—it was not fair; he was not getting a square deal; he had never had a square deal. As he brooded, all the pent-up grudges of his life rose to inflame his anger.

What should he do? For a mad second he had an impulse to take his chance and bolt; but he rejected the idea almost as soon as it had formed in his mind. He could not do it. Even if he should win through to safety, it would be desertion, the ruin of his career, as sure an end to his hopes as death itself. All the same—and as the thought struck him his lips parted in a mirthless little smile—he had still one card to play. He might be finished, but what about Faversham? He would pay his forfeit with less reluctance

if he could work the miscarriage of this precious plan. And he believed that he could. It might be that he would never marry Mary Plinn; he felt that in his heart he had always known that he would not. Very well; nor should Faversham.

(2)

The afternoon passed quietly enough. The hum of the city, carried over the high walls of the Residency, was little more than normal, though towards dusk it was broken once or twice by a burst of rifle fire.

A little after sunset David came into the messroom equipped for his journey. He was dressed as a Hindu merchant, a disguise he had previously worn with success; and in his long coat, baggy white trousers and dark red tarboosh he looked the part well enough.

"'Fancy me in fancy dress,'" sang the little doctor as he appeared. "David, my laddie, you gave me quite a turn. For a moment I thought your shady friend Moula what's-his-name had forgotten his place and burst in on us."

"Thanks," said David. "I flattered myself I was recognisably thinner than old Moula."

"You've said it," retorted the doctor. "And you'll be thinner still when you've run all the way to Tehran with half the scallywags of Asia chasing you. Well, well, here's to your good luck and a clean pair of heels."

David wrung his hand, and then Mansell's.

"Good-bye, sir," said the latter, "and best of luck."

"Good-bye, old chap," replied David, his heart warming to these friends of his exile. "And the same to you—to all of you."

Custance was standing a little to one side. Now he came forward with a letter in his hand. "You might give this to Mary," he said.

"Of course I will," answered David cordially.

Then, with a sudden rush of feeling, he held out his hand. "Good-bye, Custance."

But Aylmer appeared not to have noticed the gesture. He turned quickly and left the room, David flushing at the rebuff.

"There's an unmannerly curmudgeon for you," exclaimed the doctor. "Wait one moment and we'll have him back to say good-bye like a little gentleman."

"No, no," said David. "Leave him alone, Mac. It doesn't matter."

He found Janplin in his study. He too had a letter for Mary, which David placed with his other papers in a wallet hung round his neck.

"Ready?" inquired Janplin, laying down the book he was reading.

"Yes. We're going over the wall, as the main entrance is certainly being watched. We shall find our horses at the Persian Gate."

"Good. I'll see you on your way."

Together they went out on to the verandah, where Hari Singh was waiting for them. As they walked across the garden in the early starlight, neither man spoke, and the thought was with both that in all likelihood they were parting for ever. When the wall, fringed with jasmine, loomed above them, Janplin broke silence.

"If anything happens here," he said in a low voice, "keep an eye on Mary."

"I promise you that," David replied. There was a pause, and then he added, "Good-bye—Janplin."

"Good-bye, David."

David ran up the ladder, which had been placed in readiness. On reaching the top he straddled the wall and looked down. By the light of the hurricane lamp Janplin was carrying, he could see his old Chief smiling up at him. He gave a wave of his hand and took the ten-foot drop into the mud of the lane below. A moment later Hari Singh joined him and their journey began.

Janplin stood for a full two minutes, staring up at the dark line of the wall, where it met the night sky. " I wonder," he murmured to himself, " I wonder if I've done the right thing."

Then, with a little sigh, he turned and walked slowly back to the house.

(3)

Some people have a knack of being on the spot when things happen; and so it was that on Friday morning Rifleman Ko Pangi was again on duty when a gorgeous figure approached the Main Gate of the Residency. Ogdai Khan the Uzbeg was dressed in his smartest clothes. Under his white, astrakhan busby his long locks shone with grease, and a *khalat* of red silk fell over his loose breeches of snowy white linen. His red slippers were high-heeled like a dancer's, and his waist, slender as a woman's, was girdled with small arms, some for show, some for business, and some for both. Very smart he looked as he strutted across the big square in the morning sunlight, and a very fine fellow he fancied himself. The world was going well with Ogdai Khan. True, that old fox Moula Buksh, whose head he had sworn to have, had eluded him for the moment; but there had been pickings in the loot of the *bunnia's* house, and Ogdai Khan was a man who generally contrived to get his full share of anything that was going. Moreover, there were good times coming in Sogdiana for a gentleman of fortune. Fazz-ed-din, that son of a misbegotten slut, had gone, and Janplin, for whom he had a wholesome respect, was fallen from authority and was practically a prisoner in the Residency. But that was not an end, but a beginning. Already Ogdai Khan had received a nice little sum in advance for services to be rendered. Later, there was to be a further reward, not to mention any little thing he might collect in the way of business; and the Uzbeg, staring greedily past the Gurkha

sentry to the gleam of white walls behind, told himself that a man who had helped to rule Sogdiana for two years must have feathered his nest to some purpose. Then there was the Emir who, it was said, was in there too—a man who loved to deck his person with jewels. Not to mention the old fox Moula Buksh, who had carried off a donkey-load of valuables with him. Oh, there was a good time coming, and he, Ogdai Khan the Uzbeg, the man who was to start the trouble, would see to it that he had his portion.

He cocked his head over his shoulder to make sure that he was being duly observed and supported. Behind him, of course, were just a few of the riff-raff, with some fellows of his own kidney scattered among them to give them stomach, and one or two of the wilder *imams* to spur them on with spiritual promises; but behind these were the three hundred swordsmen who had come in from Bokhara, fine fellows, any one of whom could cleave his man with a single stroke from shoulder to midriff.

Ogdai Khan preened himself afresh and flung at the Gurkha sentry an unspeakable insult, which Ko Pangi ignored as though it were the chatter of a grey ape on a mountain path. The Uzbeg, piqued by his indifference, strutted in closer, and with his nose tilted let loose a shrill patter of offensive comment on the habits and ancestry of the little man in khaki.

"I, Ogdai Khan," he crowed, "tell thee that thy mother was a woman from the bazaars of Peshawar, that thy grandmother lost her nose, that thy father ate dirt in the streets of Kabul, and that thou thyself art a mangy scavenger, a coolie, a coward, a louse upon the body of a thief, a foulness, an excretion, a pig, the son of a pig. . . ."

Ko Pangi, without understanding a word of this tirade, was vaguely aware that he was not being flattered. Mindful, however, of the chastening which had followed his lapse from discipline on the occasion of the entry of the Russians, he restrained his first

impulse, which was to drive the butt of his rifle plumb into the stomach of this impudent fellow.

" Oh, brother," he murmured to the orderly behind him, " this peacock from the dunghills of the city talks foolishly. I pray you call the Jemadar that he may suffer us to cut a feather or two from his tail."

The appearance of the Jemadar moved the Uzbeg to fresh eloquence. A little puzzled, the Gurkhas watched him.

" Pay no heed to him," counselled the Jemadar. " It is an order, and the man is surely mad."

The Gurkhas' restraint at once irritated and emboldened Ogdai Khan. Nearer and nearer he drew, like a bantam cock challenging a rival to war, and louder and shriller became his outcries. At length, wrought into a frenzy and foaming at the mouth, he was not more than a couple of yards from the sentry. Then, suddenly, shooting his head forward, he spat furiously full in Ko Pangi's face. There was a stir and a scuffle, and the Uzbeg turned a swift somersault; his white cap dropped from his oiled locks into the mud, and a red slipper shot out into the open square like a stone from a catapult. By the time he had picked himself up, sobbing with rage and humiliation, the Jemadar had turned out the guard, and Ogdai Khan found himself in front of a line of gleaming bayonets.

Slowly he hobbled off to a safe distance, pausing in his progress to spit defiance. A hundred yards off a rabble of men were waiting, and at the sight of their leader's discomfiture surged forward, as though forced by others behind them. A babble of excited cries broke out; a stone flew through the air; another followed, and then another.

The Jemadar, meanwhile, had summoned Mansell, who came out to have a look at the crowd. On his appearance an angry shout went up, and in the back parts of the square the cry went round that Janplin himself had arrived. The mob halted, then swayed

forward and broke like a wave, the leaders being pressed almost on to the bayonets of the Gurkhas. Far back the Bokharan swordsmen were thrusting their way to the front, but so dense was the throng that they were held up and their rush miscarried. For meanwhile Mansell had given a sharp order. More men in khaki poured through the gate, and with the butts of their rifles began to beat the people back. For a moment the mass hovered, like a well-balanced Rugby scrum. Those in front were struggling to withdraw, those behind to press forward. Then the ordered weight of the Gurkhas won, and the crowd gave way, at first slowly, and then with the surge of a retreating sea. Back they went, sweeping with them the scattered swordsmen and leaving a clear ring of space in front of the gate. Here the remainder of Mansell's men were at work. Sandbags, already filled, were flung from hand to hand, and soon a substantial parapet appeared. When it was breast-high the Gurkhas outside were recalled; trestles of barbed wire were tumbled over into the square; and higher and higher rose the parapet, converting the Main Gate into a strong point.

The crowd had lost their chance. Their first onset checked, in a few moments any advantage they might have drawn from a surprise had vanished. Yet their leaders, undismayed, persisted in their plan; and once more a mass of people moved on the gate.

"No firing without my order," Mansell, mindful of Janplin's injunctions, told his N.C.O.'s.

The crowd, yelling, gesticulating, threatening, advanced till it was stopped by the barbed wire, behind which the stolid faces of the Gurkhas peeped at them over the parapet of sandbags. It was stalemate. Mansell had his men well in hand; the vanguard of the mob, daunted by the rifles in front of them, were reluctant to start a fight; while those behind, more valiant in their security, could do nothing for the press of men in front.

Custance, meanwhile, had appeared and taken command. Mansell glanced uneasily at him. Obviously, the man was in a tearing temper, scarcely fit to handle a delicate situation. What could have happened?

" Insolent swine! " muttered Aylmer. " I've a damned good mind to give them something to howl about."

Mansell, his cheerful face unwontedly grave, looked doubtful. " Plinn was pretty emphatic that there was to be no firing unless it was absolutely necessary," he said.

Custance made no reply, but walked up to the parapet and surveyed the crowd contemptuously. It may have been his open scorn, or it may have been the eloquence of the *imams,* preaching death to the Unbelievers from the rear of the crowd, that broke the deadlock, but to a crescendo of yells a scattered volley of stones hurtled through the air, thudding against the sandbags or dropping harmlessly in the mud. One stone, more fortunately aimed, struck Custance's steel helmet, and knocked it off amid shrieks of exultation. The man's temper boiled over at once. He gave a sharp order, and the Gurkhas fired a round over the heads of the crowd.

Panic followed, as the men in front struggled desperately to escape. The mass of people swayed and bent in a huge arc, so that on the outer edge of the throng men were forced back into the little alleys that led into the square.

But that short volley was to have its answer. From a house on the other side two rifles cracked, and a Gurkha, less wary than his fellows, reeled back with a bullet through the shoulder.

" By God! " shouted Custance above the din; " we'll give this scum a lesson."

He rapped out another order. This time the Gurkhas shot low, for business. At the crash of their rifles the square seemed to heave like a troubled sea, and the angry uproar rose a clear scale into the screams

of wounded, frightened men. Back the tide of people swept, fighting like beasts to escape from those spitting rifles. The thunder and the echo of fire died away, and still the crowd struggled back. In ten minutes the square was almost empty, save for half-a-dozen white figures sprawling on the stones under the wintry sun.

"Here endeth the First Lesson," remarked Custance grimly to Mansell. "That's the only argument these people understand."

CHAPTER IX

"AND ALL THAT SORT OF THING"

(1)

JANPLIN was not so pleased. "Well," he said, as Custance finished his report, "I suppose it had to come to shooting, but the fat's in the fire all right now."

Yet the day wore on without further disturbance. A strong guard held the Main Gate, and at the door leading into the palace garden a small emplacement had been thrown up; while at intervals along the high walls posts had been placed from which a Lewis gun or three or four riflemen could command the approaches.

While daylight lasted, the Great Square was empty, except for a few scared figures that scurried along by the walls of the houses like children playing a game of Puss-in-the-Corner. The lanes that skirted the Residency were deserted: it was as though the city had resolved to boycott the foreigners within its gates.

That evening, over a scrambled meal, Custance was quite cheerful. "We've given the beggars a lesson," he asserted, "and now they'll leave us alone. Don't you think so, sir?" He turned to Janplin.

"I don't." Plinn held up a warning finger. "Listen!"

Scarcely a sound came but the faint, monotonous beat of a tom-tom.

"Do you mean that drum? It's been going on for the last hour or more. But what about it?"

"I've heard that noise before," said Janplin. "At

Jullundur in 1919; and next morning there was hell to pay."

Custance shrugged his shoulders, and the little doctor joined in the talk.

"How do you suppose they'll send in the bill this time, Chief?"

"They'll try to rush us to-morrow—or perhaps to-night." He pushed back his chair and lit a cigarette. "I hoped the trouble would be a bit slower in coming. Faversham can't reach Tehran in much under a fortnight, and by that time——"

The doctor nodded. "What will be will be," he said philosophically. "The little Gurkha lad who got pipped in the shoulder is doing fine. Splendid patients, those chaps: nothing worries 'em."

"In that they differ from His Highness the Emir," said Janplin dryly. "I hope you made it clear to him this morning, doctor, that I'm not available to console him at any hour of the day."

"I did. When the firing began he was all of a lather. I had to sit for a solid hour holding the hand of the Shadow of God on Earth and assuring him that all was well with the world."

Janplin snorted. "What a man! I suppose he's happy again now."

"Fairly. I fancy his principal anxiety is lest a sufficient number of his faithful subjects have not been slaughtered."

(2)

Janplin was right in his forecast. At an early hour on the following morning, while it was still dark, the square filled silently and quickly, this time not with rabble but with fighting men, who made a determined attempt to rush the Main Gate. The garrison, however, was ready for them, and the attack broke under the fire of rifles and Lewis guns.

But at daylight the Residency was plainly in a state of siege. Every house within range of its walls held a

posse of riflemen, who through the morning sniped steadily at every target that appeared; so that the bullets hummed like bees about the big garden. Towards midday the firing grew in volume and a regular fusillade beat upon the sandbags. At twelve a third attack was launched, not upon the Main Gate, which was smothered with rifle fire, but upon the walls on both sides. Here and there small parties of men ran out with ladders, which they tried to set in position and climb. This move, however, had been expected, and as fast as the ladders appeared, the carriers were picked off from the posts along the walls.

A lull followed the failure of this third attack.

"We can keep this up till the cows come home," said Custance. "You'd better turn in, Mansell; I'll hold the fort this afternoon." The subaltern had been up most of the night, and his young face was beginning to show signs of strain.

Janplin, back from a round of the posts, sat down with a grave face.

"I don't like this quiet spell," he said abruptly. "These fellows have got some new game on."

Custance laughed. "Let 'em all come," he said carelessly; and the wish was perfectly genuine. All his feuds and grudges were now fused in a desire to kill; as though he could avenge his wrongs on the rabble of the city; as though his love for Mary, his hatred of Faversham, his quarrel with life could in some way be satisfied by bloodshed.

(3)

That evening, at the Russian headquarters just outside the city, a deputation of notables was having an unpleasant quarter of an hour with Bukholin. The Commissar did not trouble to conceal his contempt at their failure to overpower a mere handful of men, and gave them scant sympathy.

"Why do you come to me?" he asked scornfully.

"You have men, rifles, ammunition. Are not the English few enough?"

"We can do no more," replied a greybeard sulkily. "The place is a fortress. Our people will not fight."

"Have they tried to fight yet?"

The greybeard scowled. "Two hundred and thirty bodies lie on the stones of the Great Square. It is enough—too much. The *imams* continue their work, but they say they can no longer move the people. The soldiers are beginning to desert."

"Is this my affair?"

The greybeard gave him a crafty look. "It is as your honour says. This Janplin is a veritable devil. We shall now need to make our peace with him." Bukholin's impassive face gave no indication that the shot had found its target. "There will be no more fighting," concluded the notable, "unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless the dogs' teeth are drawn. Unless you send your cannon to our aid."

Bukholin drew back his lips in a grin. He was thinking hard. "Go," he said at last, "and return in half an hour."

He sent for Kossoutoff, who shook his head despondently.

"I do not like it," he objected. "You propose an act of war, and we are at peace with England. My orders are that we are not to fight the English."

"Alas, my dear General," purred Bukholin, "what are we to do? This *canaille* will not capture the place without our assistance. And we are agreed that it is necessary to Russian policy for the British Mission to be expelled."

"Expelled, yes," conceded Kossoutoff, "but murdered, no. When the townspeople enter the Residency they will cut the throats of all whom they find there."

"It is a pity," sneered Bukholin, "that this point should only occur to you, General, when with our consent already three attacks have been made."

"I do not like it," insisted Kossoutoff stubbornly.

"That is enough," said Bukholin, rapping peremptorily on the table. "I say that the guns shall be used."

A retort was on the tip of the General's tongue, but it stayed there. In his position as an officer of the old army he had frequently to remind himself that times had changed. So now, reluctantly obedient, he trotted out of the tent to give the necessary orders.

(4)

Early the next morning Janplin was on the verandah with Custance, when from afar came a dull report. There was a faint whining, rising, menacing, and ending with a loud explosion in the square. As a column of dust rose above the rim of the wall the two men turned to each other.

"The guns," said Janplin. "The Russians have come in."

Custance stood for a moment as though dazed. In the stress of the siege he had actually forgotten the Russian guns, left them clean out of his reckoning.

"But they can't," he exclaimed. "It's—it's an act of war."

"A trifle like that won't worry Bukholin."

"What have they got, sir?"

"Only mountain stuff, I believe; but big enough for the job. They can pound us to blazes, and we can do nothing."

As he spoke, a second shell arrived, skimming the wall and bursting on the stones of a paved walk.

"Bracketing," commented Janplin. "You'd better get down to the gate. I'll warn Mansell. We hold on, of course."

"Of course, sir," said Custance gravely, his composure restored, and with a twinge of admiration for Janplin he drew himself up and saluted; then turned and with a steady tread made for the Main Gate.

In this way the last fight began. For nearly an hour the Gurkhas held the gate, though their defences were crumbling about them. Shell after shell dropped among them, scattering the sandbags, killing and wounding the men behind. At first, not a man of the enemy showed himself in the square; though a burst of fire from the door leading to the palace garden marked the failure of an attempt to rush it and take the garrison in the rear. At last, when a great breach had been opened in the parapet, and more than half the Gurkhas were down, the attack proper was launched.

A moment before, the approaches to the square had been empty; now, suddenly, they were thronged with men, pressing yelling into the open space. At the same time the bombardment swelled to a crescendo of drum-fire, and riflemen, posted thickly in the houses, opened a withering fusillade on that tangled heap of sandbags and rubbish.

Custance looked swiftly round. He saw one of the Lewis guns leap six feet into the air and descend in fragments; he saw two of his men reel back and collapse on the ground; he saw Ko Pangi, with the surviving Lewis gun cuddled firmly to his shoulder, direct a stream of fire on the advancing hundreds. Then he saw him stop and fumble desperately. The gun was jammed. No time now to do anything to it. He swept the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve, snatched up a rifle and flung himself against the mouldering parapet. To kill was all that mattered. Let them take that—and that—and that: he laughed derisively to see the running figures check and fall as he pressed the trigger. To kill and kill and kill. He had emptied his magazine twice before the first of the Bokharan swordsmen, drunk with enthusiasm, jumped over the wrecked parapet in among the dead and dying Gurkhas. Custance bayoneted one man, clubbed another. He was down and up again. Then he went down for the last time, hacked almost to pieces by the long cutting swords.

The defence went under, swamped; the attackers poured through the breach like a stream breaking its banks; and in a moment the garden of the Residency was full of men.

They were met by a scattered fire from a handful of Gurkhas Janplin had collected from other posts for the reinforcement of the Main Gate. As the wave of swordsmen swept into the garden, this little band flung themselves hastily behind the piled sandbags on the verandah.

For a moment the onset was checked, while from the outlying points men trickled back by twos and threes to make their last stand at the house. Some were shot down as they ran. Young Mansell was among the last to arrive. His face was streaked with blood from the graze of a bullet, but he cleared the sandbag parapet as lightly as, two years before, he had taken his hurdles at Sandhurst. Even as he jumped a bullet caught him and he fell forward in a crumpled heap. He opened his eyes very wide for a moment and tried to smile up at Janplin, who was gently lifting him so that he might lean against the parapet; then he sighed and lay back like a tired child. With a spasm of anger, Janplin took the rifle from the dead subaltern's hands, and, with bullets chipping the verandah like a stonemason's chisel, began to fire rapidly, coldly, methodically, whenever a man showed himself.

But the end was near. The place swarmed with men. They lay behind the trunks of trees or climbed among the branches; they hid among the *débris* of the Main Gate or, more boldly, wormed their way closer in among the bushes that fringed the approach to the house. From every corner they poured a galling fire on the pitiful little band that clung to the broad verandahs and replied as best they could. From time to time a man would roll over by the trunk which had not covered him quite well enough, or another would crash suddenly from tree-top to earth like a young rook brought down by a rifle on a May afternoon in England.

But the siege always crept closer. Ever louder drummed the bullets on stone and plaster; ever more pungent was the reek of powder; ever thinner grew the line of men behind the sandbags; in the high, dark rooms behind, the little doctor worked with feverish precision among the wounded, while the Emir and a few of the fainter-hearted of the servants cowered on the floor, breaking into whimpers as each bullet crashed through to bury itself in the wall.

The end came swiftly.

On one side of the house almost all the Gurkhas had been picked off. They lay where they had fought, stout-hearted little men, true to their salt and their officers, firing till hot rifles dropped from limp fingers. Then as by magic the big swordsmen appeared, racing across the open to the silenced flank. They were at the steps, they were on the verandah, they were in the house. There were wild screams as they burst in, slashing and hewing among the unarmed servants. The little doctor, squatting on his heels as he dressed a wounded Gurkha, had scarcely risen when he went down again under a rain of savage blows. Janplin turned to meet this new peril. Followed by three or four men, he sprang through the doorway with so fierce a rush that for a moment the swordsmen wavered. For it was Janplin, the man of a hundred tales, whispered by tribal fires from the frontiers of India to the mountains of Mongolia. But the recoil passed quickly. As a fresh wave of men crowded howling behind their leaders, the throng swept forward with wild cries. The long swords swept through the air again, and yet again. A man went down, bellowing with pain; another followed, and another; but others pressed forward, and the swords rose and fell until their work was finished.

(5)

There is a moment, if you hold a watching brief in a well-contested case, when you may have to intervene;

and Bukholin, who had been unobtrusively following the fortunes of the fight, decided that this moment had arrived when the firing died down and the exultant shouts of the swordsmen proclaimed that the last defences of the Residency had fallen.

He acted quickly. In a very short time Russian troops were blocking the approaches, and a strong party was marching over the ruin of the Main Gate to occupy the house. Bukholin was among the first to arrive. " Russia goes, but Russia always comes back," he murmured enigmatically, as he clambered through the breach.

With him was Kossoutoff, silent and, if the truth be told, more than a little ashamed.

As the pair of them reached the verandah, Bukholin pointed to the body of Mansell. " One of the litter," he remarked.

Kossoutoff crossed himself surreptitiously. " They made a good fight," he said stiffly; and indeed the verandah and its neighbourhood were his witnesses to that.

" Tcha ! " retorted Bukholin contemptuously. " So will a rat when it is cornered."

Kossoutoff flushed with rage and shame. Only by an effort did he restrain himself from striking the Commissar on his painted mouth. What could this man know of the feelings of a soldier? He felt that he had never loathed him so much as at this moment. In the last years he had kept queer company, but the plain men of the revolution, who spat and slapped him on the back and called him " Comrade," were far less repugnant than this polished, powdered, crooked creature with his careless gibes and his cold courtesy.

" We must clear this rabble out," said Bukholin. " There may be papers—and other things—to secure, and you know the habits of the scum—they will destroy what is of no value in their eyes."

There was certainly no time to lose. Already the looting was in full progress. A swordsman came

strutting on to the verandah arrayed in portions of Janplin's full-dress uniform, while another man was capering about in a gown that he had rifled from Mary's wardrobe.

Kossoutoff, exasperated, barked out his orders, and the Russians doubled into the house, bundling the marauders out on to the verandah and into the garden. Some of the swordsmen, truculent after their late triumph, were inclined to show fight, but the numbers of the Russians and the memory of their formidable artillery overawed them, and they suffered themselves to be hustled outside, noisily protesting, with such spoil as they had been able to collect.

Bukholin then made his way to Janplin's study, which, being a little remote from the principal rooms, had not been touched. He looked round curiously—at the writing-table with the two big photographs of women, strangely alike, in silver frames; at the dockets of papers and all the paraphernalia of writing; at the steel filing cabinet, carefully padlocked, and the little safe in the corner of the room; at the two long chairs, and the blackened briar pipes clustering round a tin of smoking mixture; at the little pile of books, one of which, lying open, he picked up, reading aloud the title—*The Life of the Fields*, by Richard Jeffries.

"This is the place," he said to Kossoutoff. "Set a guard here. We will go through the papers at our leisure."

Two staff officers came in, escorting a very important gentleman, Said Esphansir Bagadour, Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army of Sogdiana.

"What has happened to the Emir?" inquired Bukholin.

"His body has just been found," replied the Commander-in-Chief. "He was with the servants and——" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Good," said Bukholin, adding in a low voice: "Is there any trace of——?" He raised his darkened eyebrows and looked keenly at the man.

"There is none; but a search will be made."

A-tish-oo!

The little company started and looked round.

"What is that?" asked Bukholin sharply.

A-tish-oo!

There it was again, unmistakable, with the shattering distinctness of a sneeze that someone is trying to suppress. It seemed to come from a corner of the room where a tall *almirah* stood against the wall. All eyes were turned towards it as Kossoutoff stepped forward and caught the handle. The door resisted him for a moment; then, with an effort, he wrenched it open.

"Come out," he commanded.

The others could see nothing but a mass of hanging coats, but, as they looked, there was a stir and an agitation, and a fat face, grey with fright, peered out on them.

"Come out," repeated Kossoutoff. With an upheaval of garments, a large, corpulent gentleman tumbled from the *almirah* on to the floor.

"Who is this?" inquired Bukholin in a chilly voice.

Moula Buksh—for it was he—began to explain his presence in a torrent of trembling sentences. He had been summoned to the Residency some days ago. Fearing to disobey, he had gone, to find himself made a close prisoner by the accursed Janplin. In this unhappy plight he had remained until the arrival of his deliverers, when, fearing lest he might—how wrongly!—be associated in their minds with Janplin and his wicked ways, he had concealed himself. Nothing, he protested in a quavering voice, could exceed his satisfaction, his relief, his joy, at the arrival of the Russians.

Bukholin watched him as he stammered out this pitiful tale, taking in every detail of the man.

"He lies," he said shortly.

"He does," agreed the Commander-in-Chief. "I know the man. He is one Moula Buksh, a money-lender and a rascal. Also he is a spy of the English."

Moula Buksh shrieked protests. He was not, he swore it. He hated the English, and such information as he had given them had always been false.

Unfortunately, Said Esphansir Bagadour was on pretty good terms with Ogdai Khan the Uzbeg. He now murmured in Bukholin's ear, and the Russian turned with a slight smile to the wretch at his feet.

"In that case," he said smoothly, "the man may go free. Let him depart at once."

"No, no," screamed Moula Buksh, fully aware that the avenger was awaiting him outside. "Anything but that," he wailed. "I beg, I implore—let me stay under your honour's protection." He clutched at the Russian's legs.

Bukholin signed to two of the soldiers. They stepped forward and with the butts of their rifles beat the *bunnia* to his feet. As they hustled him to the door, he made one last, frantic bid.

"Wait!" he cried. "Let me speak! You seek something. Perhaps I know where it is. Let me stay and I will tell you all—all."

Bukholin pricked up his ears. It was a bare chance, but bare chances were worth taking. At a word from him the soldiers lowered their rifles. Moula Buksh wriggled back into the centre of the room, a glint of hope in his cunning little eyes: the bow, which he had drawn at a venture, seemed to have found a mark. He searched his memory so that he might recall exactly what it was that he had overheard that night when Janplin and Faversham Sahib had talked and he had listened on the verandah outside. There was not much, it was true, but, skilfully used, the information might yet save him. He looked warily round the room.

"In your honour's ear," he whispered, fawning on Bukholin, whom he had rightly sized up as the important person to placate.

Bukholin looked round. "The man may have something to tell," he said. "Leave us, but let the soldiers be in readiness outside."

The room emptied of all but the Commissar and the *bunnia.*

"Your honour will not cast me out?" inquired Moula Buksh anxiously.

"That will depend," said Bukholin. "Perhaps not, if you have anything of interest to tell me; but if, as I suspect, you are playing a trick to gain time, you will win nothing else by it."

Moula cast an anxious look round the room, and drew a little closer to the Russian. "You seek something?" he suggested—"something that has been stolen from the palace?"

"Yes?" said Bukholin coldly.

"Four people," whispered Moula Buksh, "know where it is: Janplin, Fazz-ed-din, Faversham Sahib and the daughter of Janplin."

"I think there is another who knows," replied Bukholin, and with a quick movement he caught and twisted the *bunnia's* ear between his fingers.

Moula uttered a howl of anguish and dropped on his knees, brought to complete confession some while earlier than he had expected. "Yes, yes," he wailed. "I would not deceive your honour. I know. I will tell all that I heard Janplin say to Faversham Sahib.

"Hasten," commanded Bukholin. "Where is this thing?"

"The woman has it—the daughter of Janplin. She took it with her when she departed from Sogdiana."

Bukholin gave the imprisoned ear another twist.

"You are lying," he said, but with less confidence.

Moula broke into fresh howls as he writhed in the torture of those long pincer-like fingers. Then Bukholin released him—so suddenly that he rolled over on the floor.

"This woman"—the Russian's eye travelled to the photographs on the writing-table—"is she one of these? Answer."

Moula pointed a trembling finger at Mary's portrait, which Bukholin took up and scrutinised.

" Is that all you know? " he demanded in a hectoring voice.

" It is all," quavered Moula. " Your honour——"

Bukholin was pointing carelessly to the door. " Go," he said.

The *bunnia* scrambled to his feet and stared stupidly at the Commissar. " But," he faltered, " I have told all—all, and your honour promised——"

" I promised nothing. What you have told me is of trifling importance. Also I do not believe you. Now go."

Moula was down on the floor again, scrabbling at the Russian's knees. " Death waits for me outside," he shrieked.

" That is quite possible," agreed Bukholin pleasantly. Then, raising his voice, he called to the two soldiers who were in waiting. As they entered, he signed to them to remove the *bunnia*. Moula hung, an inert mass, as though stunned, beyond struggle, almost beyond protest, while the soldiers lugged him from the room. But at the threshold he burst into a wild clamour, so that scream after scream rang down the corridor and back to the quiet room where the Commissar stood. The last scream changed suddenly into something between a cough and a gurgle, as Ogdai Khan the Uzbeg paid an old debt. Bukholin smiled faintly.

(6)

General Kossoutoff was not a squeamish man. In the war and, still more, in the Revolution, he had witnessed sights which might have turned the stomach of any man; but that his had not been permanently turned was proved by his office as a General in the Red Army. In a moment of candour he might have confessed that he had contrived to retain his rank by looking the other way. In Sogdiana, for instance, he had looked the other way while his colleague was instigating a murderous attack on the British Mission.

After one mild objection, he had looked the other way while his guns pounded the defences into fragments. He had further just succeeded in averting his gaze from a two-foot knife driven squarely into the breast of a stout Hindu, while two of his men stood by grinning. He now returned to Janplin's room, to find Bukholin leering at the photograph of a woman.

" Here, General," the Commissar cried facetiously, " surely you have an eye for the sex. What do you think of the great Plinn's taste? " He held out the photograph at arm's length and ogled it.

Then something funny happened to the General—something that perhaps he could not have explained even to himself. It may have been the memory of Plinn's mutilated body, just shown to him. It may be that Bukholin's gesture was the spark that lighted an accumulated charge of gunpowder. That he—this vulgar, scented brute—not content with his treacherous attack on the Residency and the slaughter of its garrison, should break into Plinn's private room and lay his unclean hands on the sacred things of the dead man's life, seemed suddenly an outrage not to be borne. Kossoutoff turned on the Commissar with blazing eyes.

" You are a coward and a thief and a murderer," he said fiercely, " a vile creature without shame. How dare you insult the dead! He was a man, a soldier, and I, who am also a soldier, understand. But you—you rat from the sewers of Moscow—you—you——" He paused as he struggled to give his indignation words. " It is enough. I command here. I place you under arrest."

He turned abruptly to leave the room, to search maybe for some officer whom he could trust to execute his order. But Bukholin was too quick for him. Before that shabby but curiously dignified little figure in grey uniform could reach the door, the Commissar's revolver was out of his pocket. He fired once, and again, and the grey uniform crumpled into a heap on the floor.

When, a moment later, the soldiers, with startled faces, peered cautiously into the room, Bukholin pointed to the body. "Take it away," he commanded.

For an instant the men hesitated. Then, as they caught the look on their Commissar's face, they obeyed.

"What a fool!" murmured Bukholin to himself when he was once more alone; and that was the only epitaph achieved by General Boris Kossoutoff, once of the Imperial Russian Army.

Bukholin mopped his brow with a scented handkerchief and, very deliberately taking from his pocket a woman's vanity bag, dabbed his cheeks with powder. Then he picked up the portrait of Mary Plinn, slit open the back of the frame, detached the photograph, rolled it neatly up, and placed it in his pocket.

CHAPTER X

THE NEWS

(1)

SIR FOSTER BRADWARDINE looked ruefully across the litter of the breakfast-table, his irascible but kindly face puckered in perplexity.

"Of course, m'dear," he said testily to his wife, "we shall have to tell her at once—that is, I shall; but 'pon my soul, I never saw a job I liked less. To tell that poor child—it's a ghastly mess, Connie, and that's the truth." He shook his head sadly, pushed his chair back, damned the *khitmatgar* out of the room, and flung his napkin on the table with an air of challenging the world to take note of the nastiness of the mess.

"I suppose," ventured Lady Bradwardine, a placid, slightly faded woman in the early fifties, "there's no chance——"

"Chance?" fumed Sir Foster. "Not a shadow, m'dear, not a shadow. Wish to God there was. Often had news from Sogdiana through that source before and I've seldom known it wrong; never when the news was bad. Then there's this fellow—what's his name?"

"Major Faversham," put in his wife.

"Faversham—rotten memory I've got—that's the chap. He knew pretty well it was coming before he cleared off. Says so in that infernal long letter which he sent over the hills by the Persian mail. Says he's crocked at Kuchan and can't get on. Seems to think we can do something to stop the row at Sogdiana. God knows what."

"Anyhow, it's apparently too late now," commented Lady Bradwardine sadly.

"Too late? It never was anything else. Always thought that business would come to a sticky end. Said so. But Janplin—well, you know what Janplin was, bless his obstinate old heart!" He blew his nose thoughtfully.

"I suppose the Russians *were* at the bottom of the attack on the Residency?"

"Of course they were!" cried the little man. "Treacherous swine! But what can we do here? I report to Delhi; Delhi reports to Whitehall; Whitehall carries on an infernal correspondence course with Moscow. And at the end of it, nothing—except perhaps a rap on my knuckles for not minding my own business. Pah!"

Sir Foster shook his head, shot from his chair, and stamped up and down the room. In mid career he exploded afresh, pointing an indignant finger at his wife.

"And to think of Janplin—scuppered by that—that poisonous scum! Dammit, Connie, it makes me sick. Someone should hang for it."

"But we've got to think of Mary," suggested Connie, bringing her husband back to the point. "Poor darling! It's too awful, but, as you say, she ought to be told now."

"If she doesn't hear it from us, she'll hear it from that fool of an ayah, or some young idiot from the city. Yes, I suppose I shall have to tell her."

"Don't you think," ventured Connie, who knew exactly what the upshot would be, "that I had better do it, Foster?"

"You!" Sir Foster hastened to suppress the relief that swept across his face. "Oh no, m'dear, wouldn't do, wouldn't do. Nice of you to suggest it, but I couldn't put it on you. Not your job."

"But that's just what it is," said Lady Bradwardine, rising with the faintest of smiles and going across to her husband. "It's—easier for a woman to say it, darling, and easier for Mary to hear it from a woman. I

don't really mind," she went on, taking her husband by the lapels of his coat; " at least, it's up to us to—to let her down as gently as possible."

Sir Foster grunted. " Oh, well," he growled, " if you really think so, m'dear. Didn't want to land you with it, y'know. Infernally grateful, all the same. Perhaps you're right. Comes better from you than me, and God knows I'm no use at this kind of thing, eh? "

" Not the least," agreed Connie sweetly. " Now sit down and smoke your pipe, while I go and tell Mary."

" Very well, m'dear." Foster obeyed with unusual meekness. " You'll know where to find me if you want me," he added with faint-hearted chivalry.

(2)

Mary was sitting on the verandah, looking out over a garden where the first tight little buds were burgeoning on the rose bushes and the deep scarlet of pomegranate blossom was sprinkled like spots of blood on the trees. The winter was passing, spring was coming—the Persian spring that comes with the speed and glory of a runner—and yet . . . She picked up Tim, Lady Bradwardine's terrier, who had, from the moment of her arrival, taken her into his particular care. " Oh, Tim," she whispered, smoothing back his ears and gazing into his serious, adoring eyes, " it's so long, Timmy, and we've heard nothing—nothing." Tim wriggled sympathetically and made a sudden attempt, at once frustrated, to lick his friend's face.

In three days' time a fortnight would have passed since the evening when Mary, tired and travel-grimed, had reached the Bradwardines' big house at Tehran. Janet, after bluffing and bullying her way back to Persia, had delivered her charge and gone off. The Bradwardines, she explained, were almost strangers, and, although in the East hospitality is more generously interpreted than in Europe, a week of her company was as much as she cared to risk. Also, she added, " Although Sir Foster's a dear, I quarrel with him

nearly as much as with your father, and if I'm here when the hot weather comes, one fine day he'll have an apoplexy." So she had flitted off to Baghdad, where she had a bone to pick with the Museum of Antiquities and several friends to look up. "But remember," were her last words, "if—if I'm wanted, I'll be back like a homing pigeon." In fact, she had gone with a greater reluctance than she would have owned. There had been thunder in the air at Sogdiana; or, as she put it to Sir Foster, "The place *smelt* all wrong, if you know what I mean." And Sir Foster, with thirty years of Eastern service behind him, had nodded gravely. So, although in the start of her westward journey she drew consolation from the memory of Janplin's genius for getting out of tight places, she was not happy; and her last glimpse of Mary's little, troubled, upturned face haunted her.

At Tehran the days had slipped by. Sir Foster would gruffly hold forth on the uncertainty of the roads in the early spring, when the mountain snows were beginning to melt and all the rivers were overrunning their banks. "No telegraph now, m'dear," he would remind her, "and no railway since the War. Pity the wireless rig your father ordered was held up till the spring. So, you see, we couldn't expect to hear yet awhile." Latterly there had been less conviction in his voice, reflected Mary, and that very morning at breakfast Sir Foster had been even gruffer and more monosyllabic than usual, while Lady Bradwardine had been silent and a little embarrassed in her manner.

"I'm not happy, Timmy," Mary confided, stroking his smooth head with her cheek. "You see, they're all there: Aylmer, and daddy—my one and only daddy——"

A shadow fell across the verandah. Looking up, she saw the tall figure of Lady Bradwardine in the doorway; and on her face, written so plainly that in her mood Mary could not fail to read it, the message she brought.

Tim tumbled earthwards with Mary's abrupt rise; and Lady Bradwardine knew, as soon as she saw the girl's face, that her task was done.

"Oh, my dear!" she said, and went to her and took a little stiff hand in hers. "You're going to be terribly brave, aren't you?—Janplin's daughter?"

Mary drew away from her. "Are they all dead?" she asked in a toneless voice that seemed to belong to someone else.

"My dear, we're afraid, dreadfully afraid. . . . Foster's had news—very bad news."

"Are they all dead?" repeated Mary.

Lady Bradwardine bowed her head. "Except Major Faversham," she whispered.

Mary stared, unseeing, out on the sunlit garden. Now that this had come, she knew that it was what in her heart she had been expecting. Why didn't it hurt her more? Why was she suddenly numb? They were all dead—Daddy, Aylmer, all—except David.

"David!" she spoke aloud. "Why isn't he dead too? He ought to be, oughtn't he? If they're all dead? And he—he promised."

Lady Bradwardine caught her breath in a little gasp. This was awful. If only the girl would cry! These questions and that unnatural voice were more than she could face. "Oh, my darling," she said, "don't talk like that. Major Faversham's sent a letter from your father and from—from Major Custance."

"Is he here?"

"He's been ill. But he's coming as soon as he can."

"I don't believe I want to see him," muttered Mary.

"My dear," said Lady Bradwardine, putting her arm round the girl's shoulder, "I think you should come inside now."

Suddenly Mary tore herself away from the encircling arm and flung herself down in a heap on the verandah, as pain, breaking through her numbness, at last pierced her.

"Oh, daddy!" she cried in a despairing voice. "Daddy, daddy, daddy!"

Lady Bradwardine went down on her knees beside her. But even in that moment of tragedy it struck her as strange that the name on the girl's lips should have been her father's and not her lover's.

(3)

On Janet in Baghdad the news had the effect of an instantaneous fuse. She flew to the telegraph office, where she despatched to various cousins, nephews and friends in all three Parliamentary parties a series of cables, so minatory in tone and so blistering in phrase that the greater part were subsequently brought back to her with a polite request from the Secretariat that she should moderate her language. She wound up with an incoherent message of love and sympathy to Mary, at the end of which she promised to return to Tehran at once.

The rest of that day she spent in a fierce investment of the Secretariat. Stout babus fled before her withering tongue; A.D.C.'s and secretaries went down like skittles in her path; until at last she broke through into the sanctum, hushed and secluded, where the High Commissioner himself sat in authority. He—a friend of long standing—received her with the resignation of a man who has been expecting some inevitable and fearful visitation. He listened patiently while for ten minutes she fulminated against the blindness and supineness of officials.

"But, Janet," he protested mildly, when at last she gave him an opening, "I agree with you that it's a terrible business, but I don't quite see what you expect us to do." He was imprudent enough to add: "You know, we can't exactly march the exiguous Defence Force of a Mandated Territory five hundred miles into the heart of Asia."

Janet's exasperation exploded in an outburst of Lowland Scots. "Of all the clacking, havering

bodies," she stormed, "that Providence and a feckless Government have set in authority, you, Willie Penson, are the worst. Why, I'll not believe you're even sorry."

"Ah, that's not fair," said the High Commissioner quickly. "Janplin was one of my best and oldest friends, Janet. God knows I'm desperately sorry."

Looking up, he saw two heavy tears rolling down weather-beaten cheeks.

"Why, Janet," he exclaimed in real distress. "I say, you mustn't—Janet!"

She had turned away from him. "I'm a foolish old woman, Willie," she said in a harsh voice, "and you'll please not to mind me. If I come plaguing you with my tantrums, it's because—because my silly old heart is just about breaking; and if I didn't do this I'd be sitting down in a corner of the bungalow making a perfect idiot of myself because the only man in all the world was dead."

"I—I didn't know," stammered the embarrassed High Commissioner. "I never guessed——"

"No one ever guessed," said Janet grimly, "and least of all the dear man himself. It was all over years ago, Willie, and no one but myself the wiser or the worse off. There, it's done me a power of good to make a clean breast of it, and I'll not waste any more of your time."

"You shall come as often and stay as long as you like," insisted the High Commissioner. "And if there's any mortal thing in reason I can do, I'll do it."

"You can do nothing," admitted Janet sadly. "No one can do anything now. As for me, I'm away to-morrow morning to that child of Janplin's, who'll likely be eating her heart out at Tehran. Tell your young men the glad news, Willie," she added with a touch of fierce humour; "they'll not be sorry to see my dust."

(4)

When, three days later, Mary told Janet Gilchrist that she was the one person in the world whom she

wanted to see, she was telling nothing less than the truth. In fact, she had just refused, quietly but quite resolutely, an interview with David; nor had Lady Bradwardine's gentle expostulations moved her an inch.

Sir Foster had taken her refusal less easily. "Hang it all, Connie," he had exclaimed in the privacy of his wife's bedroom, "it's not fair on the fellow. What's she got against him?"

"I think she feels he should not have left Sogdiana."

"Bunkum, my dear," protested the little man. "Fellow had to go. Janplin sent him. Suppose he had an idea that we might do something here to help. Nothing in it, y'know, but Janplin wasn't a man you could argue with."

"Still, that's what she feels."

"Damned unreasonable," grumbled Sir Foster. "Chap had a good doing on the way, too. Pretty tough work to get through at all. And he wants to see her. Only natural. Nice fellow. Wish you'd talk to her again."

"I have spoken to her. And, Foster, we must make allowances. The child has had a terrible shock."

"Yes, yes, yes," agreed Sir Foster testily. "I know that. Damned sorry for her. But she mustn't knuckle under to it, eh? Perhaps I'd better have a word with her."

"I hope, Foster," said his wife in alarm, "you'll do nothing of the sort. I won't have her upset any more. If I know anything about it, she's on the edge of a breakdown as it is, and if you start worrying her, anything may happen. If she doesn't want to see Major Faversham, she shan't."

"Oh, all right, all right, m'dear," growled Sir Foster. "If you feel like that, I'll say no more. Don't seem natural, all the same."

Possibly if Sir Foster had read one of the crumpled letters which had preceded David across the Persian hills, he might have thought Mary's attitude more natural. Mary, with one glance at Aylmer's familiar

writing, had taken the letter with her to the privacy of her room.

"My dearest," he had written,

"The Russians have arrived. Anything may happen, and this is perhaps the last message that will reach you from me. This morning your father called us together to tell us that we could hardly hope to escape from here. But someone, he added, must go with the news to Persia, must leave while the way was still open. The 'someone,' of course, was to be either Faversham or myself, and—Faversham took the chance. Don't be hard on him for that, Mary; I'm not grudging him his life, especially as he carries this last message of mine to you. You used to laugh at me when I told you that he was in love with you. But I was right, and now—well, he grasped his opportunity, and I can't blame him for it. Although it's just a little hard to think that when you read these lines, he will perhaps be standing by you, while I . . . You must forget me, darling; or, at least as I'm not unselfish enough to want you to forget me altogether, forget everything that it hurts me to remember now, that I was ever ungenerous, or moody, or jealous, or unkind. But remember how I loved you."

There was more in the letter, but those few lines had accomplished the purpose for which Aylmer had written them. He, Aylmer, was the brave, generous man who stood to his post in the hour of danger; David was the deserter who scuttled off to safety. Normally, Mary might have detected the falseness that lay in those specious lines, but now, reeling under the shock of the news, the truth appeared as clear as crystal.

To David, humble of heart, it had seemed at first only natural that Mary should shrink from the sight of him and from the touch of the memories he must bring. It was Sir Foster, most undiplomatic of diplomats, who with the kindest of intentions first gave him a hint of the truth.

"All rot," he assured David. "Told m' wife so. But the girl's got an idea into her pretty head, and m' wife seems to think we mustn't worry her. Eh?"

David agreed, but a tiny soreness lay behind his consent. He had begged Janplin to be allowed to stay; he knew that in his heart he had wanted to stay. Nor, though he spoke little of it, had his late journey been so easy. At Tehran he might have made a fine tale of his adventures. The great ford of the Oxus had been held by Baratir, the famous robber, who stripped and plundered all who passed, so that David and Hari Singh, turning down-stream to avoid this inconvenient gentleman, had been forced to swim or wade the better part of a mile through icy waters. They had been nearly drowned, and the wetting gave David the worst attack of fever he had ever had. Two nights later, at a caravanserai, another gang of robbers had attacked and been with difficulty beaten off. David, aching and shivering, had struggled on, dizzy with quinine and half-delirious. Their beasts had foundered, and they had had to walk until they could buy fresh mounts. Still he had gone on, although his strength had left him, and only a flicker of will kept him to his task—that, and the thought to which his reeling brain clung with desperate tenacity, that from his speedy arrival in Persia the safety of his comrades hung by a tenuous thread. It had all been for nothing, but he had tried—God knew how he had tried. And now Janplin and those other good fellows were dead, and Mary, it seemed, had no use for him.

To the last day of his stay at Tehran he hoped for some word of friendship, some sign of understanding; but none came, and at last he had his marching orders. Before he left he sent Mary a short letter.

"It hurt me just a little that you should misjudge me, my dear," he wrote, "you who were always so fair and generous. And yet I think I understand, and you need not be afraid that I shall bother you. But if ever you want me, you've only to say the word, and wherever you are, or wherever I am, I'll come to you."

PART II

JANPLIN'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER I

JANPLIN'S CURE

(1)

THE diplomats were still exchanging notes and pursuing formulas when David Faversham slipped down the Tigris to Basra and took ship for Bombay. Summoned to Simla to make his report to the Government of India, he obeyed with a sick heart. It was too late to save Janplin, and it was becoming quite clear that no one proposed to avenge him. Any doubts that David might have had on the last point vanished at his first interview with a Very Great Man in the Secretariat at Simla.

The Very Great Man had sat in authority for so long that he had forgotten how to suffer subordinates gladly: which is what sometimes happens to an ex-Lieutenant-Governor and a member of the Council of His Excellency the Viceroy. So when David, having bluntly set forth the truth about Sogdiana, hinted with a touch of bitterness that we did not look like doing much about it, the Very Great Man was inclined to be snubby.

"The matter," he announced in a chilly voice, "is at present the subject of diplomatic exchanges between Downing Street and Moscow."

"Which means, I suppose," retorted David, his self-control slipping a further notch, "that as usual we shall end by eating dirt."

The Very Great Man was perturbed, not to say annoyed. He adjusted his eyeglass and gave David a stern look. That last remark was highly improper: when he came to think of it, it was the kind of thing that

poor Plinn had been a little too fond of saying. Plinn, of course, had been—Plinn; a useful man in his way, but lacking in a due sense of responsibility. Plinn had been able to say things like that and, in the vulgar phrase, "to get away with it"; but the Very Great Man had no intention of permitting such licence to an underling like this Faversham.

"There are aspects," he said in a voice as cordial as an iceberg, "of which you are probably ignorant, Major Faversham, and which I do not propose to discuss with you."

David felt a hot flush of temper mounting to his head, but he answered quietly enough. "The Commissar, Bukholin, who engineered the massacre, reminded Plinn in my hearing that England was a long way off. Plinn retorted that England had a long arm, and Bukholin added, 'And a short memory.' It seems Bukholin was right."

The Very Great Man was now greatly annoyed. He had been given a back-answer. It was long since anyone had dared to address him in such impertinent and insubordinate terms, and his first impulse was to read the offender a stern lecture. Almost at once, however, he reflected that the fellow could hardly be himself to talk in this wild way. Probably his experiences in escaping from Sogdiana had slightly unhinged him, so that he was unconscious of the impropriety of his words. If that were so, tact would be required. There must be no scene. The man must be humoured, let off lightly.

"My dear fellow," he said with ponderous geniality, "you mustn't take this sad business too much to heart. Now I'll tell you what you want—a good holiday, eh? How about taking six months' leave? Go home and forget that such a place as Sogdiana exists."

At that David's self-control snapped like a rotten twig and he broke into a peal of hysterical laughter. "Oh," he gasped, "you—you—a good holiday—oh, my God!" He sobbed and rocked in his chair.

The Very Great Man rose in consternation. This

was awful, the scene that he had feared. He glanced nervously at the big double doors. What would the babus think if they heard that appalling noise? He looked helplessly at his subordinate, Perryman, a much younger man who had been watching David with sympathy. Perryman strode forward and caught him by the shoulder.

"Stop that!" he said fiercely. "Do you hear? Stop it!"

David, the tears trickling down his cheeks, fought back his hysteria.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly at last. "I apologise, sir. No business to behave like that. All the same, I don't want any leave at present, thanks."

"Well, we'll see what we can do, we'll see," purred the Very Great Man, shepherding David gently to the door. "Think it over and don't worry, my dear fellow, don't worry."

David fled.

"Phew," said the Very Great Man to Perryman, when the door was safely closed. "That was most unpleasant. The man is really hardly responsible for his words."

"I'm sorry for him," said Perryman shortly; "he's been pretty hard hit, poor devil."

"If he refuses leave," ruminated the Very Great Man, "he is going to place us in a difficult situation. In his present frame of mind I should be reluctant to entrust him with any but the most subordinate work. It's difficult, very difficult." He shook his head and pursed his lips and hummed and hawed. At the moment he could not recall a previous case in which a man had refused leave. There was no precedent, and in the absence of a precedent the Very Great Man never quite knew what to do. Perhaps, on reflection, it was better that this Faversham fellow should not go on leave just yet. He might talk—at the Club, on the voyage, at home; and if his recent outburst were a fair sample of his ordinary conversation, there might be trouble—questions in the House, perhaps: the Very Great Man repressed a slight shudder; even—horror

of horrors!—leading articles in the Press. Yes, the man would be better out of the way until he had recovered—fully recovered—from his late experiences. The Very Great Man's eye roved uneasily over the vast map of India that hung from the opposite wall; and, travelling from Simla through the Punjab, the United Provinces and Bengal, came finally to rest in Assam.

"Weren't we saying," he exclaimed, as one to whom a bright idea had just occurred, "that we wanted someone to overhaul the North-East Frontier? It's a long time since anyone was round there, and those people—um—um——"

"The Bebejya Michmis," put in Perryman tactfully.

"Exactly. The—well, they want keeping up to the mark. Faversham, I believe, was in those parts before he joined Plinn?"

"He was there for three years." It was Perryman's job to have every sort of information on tap.

"We'll send him back there," announced the Very Great Man with immense decision. "We'll send him off at once. See to it, my dear fellow, see to it. That's what he needs. Work, Perryman, work—the great anodyne."

"And we wonder," Perryman muttered to himself as he left the Presence, "why we are called 'the Heavenborn' and generally hated."

David, meanwhile, was striding along the Mall at four and a half miles an hour. He was seeing red, and little else, so that he cut in succession three charming ladies of his acquaintance who leaned out of dandies and called to him.

"That old fool!" he exploded to himself. "Or is he only a fool? Shouldn't be surprised if he wasn't rather glad that Janplin was out of the way. Sort of man *he* could never stick at any price. So I'm to take a holiday and forget! Oh, my God!"

He strode fiercely on and on until he was suddenly aware that he had reached the approach to Viceregal Lodge. He stopped short to stare at a glimpse of rococo splendours soaring above the trees, and laughed,

so unexpectedly that a comatose native, squatting by the roadside, rose in alarm and scuttled off. Then David turned and walked slowly back to his hotel.

That evening he got his orders from the Very Great Man. They were solemn, official and detailed, and their purport was quite obvious. David was not wanted in Simla at present. He was not wanted very much anywhere; and the North-East Frontier was the nearest spot to nowhere on earth that anyone could devise.

"Great is the Government of India," he murmured with a weary little sigh, "and I remain its humble, obedient servant."

(2)

There was a counsel of Janplin's that stuck tenaciously in David's memory. "When you're really up against it," Janplin would say, "and feel you've just about reached breaking point, there's nothing like the Back of Beyond for putting you right again." Janplin knew. After his wife's death he had saved his soul by a journey into Thibet which would have broken most men's bodies; and more than once, when the ways of governments had driven him to the edge of open rebellion, he had recovered his balance by a month in the solitudes of Kashmir or Garwhal.

The remedy, of course, is heroic and not for every invalid. Many men, with a journey such as David had lately accomplished so close behind them, would have hankered after the fleshpots, excusing themselves from fresh hardship on the score of unfitness. To David, however, with Janplin's words in his mind, the new mission was not unwelcome, and little more than a week after his interview with the Very Great Man he was ready to take the northward road from Shillong, the capital of the province of Assam.

First, he had to bid good-bye to Hari Singh, the faithful Sikh with a shady past, who had accompanied him from Sogdiana and who was now reluctant to leave him. "The Burra Sahib is dead," he announced

calmly; " therefore am I now the servant of the Chota Sahib." He was no hillman, but only a promise to be readmitted to service on the Chota Sahib's return reconciled him to a separation. Looking back at that disconsolate figure standing in the Club compound, David realised with an ache that he had snapped the last thread that linked him to Janplin. Better perhaps to do so, but it hurt. He waved his hand and rode rapidly on in the wake of his baggage mules.

And before he had gone many miles, the first feeble beginnings of his cure were at work. It was a dazzling April day, and his little hill *tat*, sturdy of limb and sure of foot, carried him briskly along; through clumps of rhododendron, glowing with scarlet blossom, and past groves of graceful deodar; down into a valley where a cataract of water dropped fifty feet into a seething pool; up the other side, through a village of wooden huts, crazy but picturesque, from which squat little hillmen came out with grins of welcome; higher and still higher, till he overlooked another valley, beyond it ridge upon ridge, red and green, grey and purple, orange and saffron; and, in the far distance, the high Himalayas themselves, white and terrible and ordered like the spears of an army.

And as David rode, Black Care, that had been sitting so close to him during those last weeks, rolled from his saddle over the *khud* side and was gone. The sun went down in glory; one by one the stars pricked their places in the sky; and the coolness of the night breeze stung the lips. Ten miles away a *khud* fire writhed like a flaming serpent across the mountain. David sniffed the clean scent of hill and wood, and reined in, once in a while, to listen to the long-drawn chirrup of a cicada, or the nervous bark of the khakur deer. Then he rode on, till he sighted, flickering among trees a mile ahead, the little, lonely light of the forest bungalow that was the end of his first stage. His *tat*, tired but willing, broke into a scurry, and David came in singing like a schoolboy off for the holidays.

It was Janplin's cure.

CHAPTER II

STAVROCK

(1)

DID Stavrock lie a little nearer a main road or a great town, it would undoubtedly be described in guide-books as " a beauty spot " and " an old-world retreat," and suffer accordingly. It owes to its remoteness its escape from the cheap tripper and the char-à-banc party, although, during the summer months, the two inns, the Lion and the White Horse, are mildly invaded by outlandish folk with long beards and loose clothes who come down to sketch in a village where, in defiance of Housing Schemes, not a cottage dates later than the year 1700.

The Abbey, of course, is the core of the place. It was one of the great monastic foundations of the West until Master Thomas Cromwell, who had an eye for property, put the monks out and a friend of his own in. Afterwards it changed hands once or twice until, about the year 1720, it was bought by one Robert Plinn, a wealthy clothier of Corsham.

Two hundred years later it lay, much as on the day when the first Plinn rode in, tawny grey in the sunlight, the great Tudor hall which Cromwell's friend had added preening its noble front, while behind it a maze of living-rooms and long passages ended in the old cloisters, now half-ruinous; and behind these again a stretch of lawn sloped down to the Avon, where once the monks had fished for their Friday dinners. Across the river rose Havilden Hill, the branch road to Devizes lying across it like a white scar on a man's shoulder.

On a late May day Stavrock was at its loveliest. The low houses, with their timbered walls, their crooked gables and their thatched roofs straddled a wide street, almost empty of people. There were a couple of artists, languidly working at their easels, with a few children hovering inquisitively round them. Outside the Lion a horse drooped between the shafts of a cart, awaiting patiently the return of his master from the dark bar of the inn. One of the older inhabitants was dozing on a stone seat by the lichen-stained cross; and a dog or two sprawled about on the warm pavement. Very old, very quiet, very sleepy, Stavrock had an air of taking no count of the centuries.

To reach the Abbey you must follow the short street till, leaving the village behind, it becomes a road and bends sharply to the right, to skirt the ten-foot wall of the Abbey grounds, to cross, a little further on, the Avon, and to begin its climb up Havilden Hill. At the point of the curve you would see, facing you, a lodge and iron gates; and beyond these, across a hundred yards of meadow, the north front of the Abbey.

Under a big cedar tree on the lawn between Abbey and river, two hammocks were slung. The tennis court, close by, lay washed in sunshine, and the dazzling whiteness of its lines, the tautness of the net and the presence of a few scattered balls showed that a game had been lately in progress.

"Bill, don't snore!"

Mary Plinn leant lazily out of her hammock, picked up a cushion from the ground and flung it feebly at the occupant of the other hammock. There was a gurgle and a snort, and a plain, pleasant, freckled face, with a thatch of sandy hair on top and a large mouth that broke into a grin, peered over the hammock's edge.

"Hullo! Want some more tennis?" inquired Bill Campion.

"No," said Mary with conviction. "Do you?"

"No. Where are the twins?"

"I haven't an idea. They vanished river-wards on some dark enterprise. Presently they will reappear, very muddy."

"They ought to be smacked," said Bill lazily. "Why did you wake me up?"

"Because you were snoring."

Bill lay back in his hammock. "In a moment," he remarked sleepily, "I shall be snoring again."

"Wake up," said Mary energetically. "Do you hear me, Bill? You've slept long enough and I want to talk."

Bill obediently hitched himself higher in the hammock and clasped his hands behind his head. "All right," he conceded amiably. "What's Janet doing this warm afternoon? Something strenuous, I bet."

"She's taken her notorious car to the other side of the county—Avebury or somewhere—Druid remains."

"Wonderful! Mary, your ancient retainer is approaching with stately tread. The worst has happened. Callers! No, we're saved; it's only letters."

On the lawn the black figure of Humphreys, white of hair and slow of gait, appeared. He carried a silver tray crowned with a bundle of letters, which Mary took from him with a word of thanks.

"Bills," she murmured, "bills, and more bills. No, that's from Mr. Hedges. A notice from the County Council. The Income Tax man. Oh dear, what plagues people are!"

"I can't think," remarked Bill, sitting up, toe on ground and swinging himself gently to and fro, "why you don't turn all that muck over to Hedges. He *is* your agent, isn't he?"

"Principle, my child; something you don't understand. Oh, this is better—a letter from Aunt Frances, and a ——" Her voice faded away.

Bill regarded her with puckered face.

"Mary," he asked, "have you had any more truck with the picture postcard blighter?"

Mary shot him a glance that was faintly troubled. "Ye-es," she said slowly; "as a matter of fact, this is from him." She tossed across to Bill the last of her correspondence, a postcard bearing a foreign stamp. Bill caught and examined it.

"'The Hofburg, Vienna,'" he read. "Very pretty. And do you see?—the bloke's put his initials in the corner: L. B., or something like it. I'd never trust a chap who used purple ink. But what's the great idea?"

"Rubbish," announced Mary. "At least I suppose so."

Bill swung himself to and fro. "Look here," he said after a moment's silence, "I may be an unobservant sort of chap, but I'm not quite blind. Own up that you're a tiny bit bothered—have been ever since the postcard of that thingummy place blew in."

"You shouldn't read other people's postcards."

"I always do; it's a habit. Besides, I didn't. I only looked at the pretty picture and asked you who had sent it. But seriously, Mary, wouldn't you like to get it off your chest?"

Mary shook her head.

"That's the third postcard you've had that I've seen," Bill persisted. "One from Damascus, the next from Constantinople, and now this one." He fingered it thoughtfully. "Almost looks as if the fellow was on his way here. Who is he? You've not been encouraging some lawless son of the desert, Mary? Sending him views of the Abbey with a row of crosses in the bottom left-hand corner?"

"Idiot! You're not funny."

"All right. If you won't, you won't. All the same, I think you might trust me just a little."

"I do, Bill; it's not that. It's—it's just that I can't tell you any more."

"Have you told Janet?"

"No."

"I don't like it, and the thing's bothering you. Mary, if by any chance the blighter should blow in

and you want someone to break his fountain pen for him or his neck or anything——"

"I promise I'll ring up Havilden 37."

"It's a bargain. And at the news that the picture postcard bloke has been sighted, striding rapidly up the drive with his fountain pen charged with purple ink, the Pack—twins and all—shall at once be mobilised."

"And talking of the twins, here they are. What I like about your young brothers, Bill, is that whatever else they may miss, it won't be tea."

"Greedy little blighters!" said Bill severely.

"I hope," called Mary, "you two haven't been tormenting poor Mr. Constantine again."

The twins grinned uneasily at each other.

"What, Blackbeard?" said Colin. "No."

"You see," explained Micky more candidly, "he wasn't there."

"Thank goodness for that," said Mary.

"Is Constantine the black-bearded chap who's sketching the Abbey front?" inquired Bill lazily.

"Yes," Mary replied. "He's taken the Priory Farm for three months, and for some reason your wretched brothers take a particular delight in trespassing on his premises and otherwise annoying him. Yesterday he complained to me. I had to explain that I was not the twins' keeper."

"I should think not," said Bill. "For that matter, who is? Me, I suppose. Colin, Micky, you're filthy; go and wash yourselves."

(2)

More than a year had passed since Janet Gilchrist had shepherded back to England a pale, silent, piteous girl who had shrunk into odd corners of the P. & O. boat to escape the sympathy of fellow-passengers.

"You'll come to Cairns with me," Janet had announced abruptly on the morning they sailed from Port Said.

Mary shook her head.

"Now what is it?" demanded Janet.

"You're a darling," Mary explained, "and I'd love to come, but I'm going to live at Stavrock."

"Heavens!" cried Janet. "You can't go and live by yourself in that barrack."

"It's what Daddy would have wished," replied Mary, with obstinacy on her lips. "You see—he always said he'd neglected the old place disgracefully and that one day, when he retired, he'd make up for it."

"But he wouldn't have expected you to live there alone."

"It's going to be my job," explained Mary. "I've thought it all out, dearest Aunt Janet. I—I want to do some of the things for the people and the place that he would have done if—if——" She broke off with a little catch in her voice.

Janet had yielded at once. "Oh well, child, if that's the way it is—— But you'll not be alone if you'll allow an old woman to quarter herself on you."

"Aunt Janet, that would be lovely. But you mustn't. I know you want to be at Cairns."

"Nonsense! Cairns or Stavrock, it's all one to me." That was a stout lie: to Janet every hour spent in Europe out of sight of the Pentlands was an hour wasted. So, however, it had been settled. She had planted herself at Stavrock, and there she had stayed for a whole year. There was a travel-book she was writing; there was the country to explore; there was a gardener to bully; and there was Mary.

Lately, the *wanderlust* had been stirring in Janet's veins. "It's no use, my dear," she said one fine spring morning. "The thought of another English winter makes my flesh creep. I shall go up to Cairns at the beginning of July to put the place straight, and you shall join me there in August. After that, the end of September—God is great!—will see me as near Port Said as makes no odds. All the same, I'm not liking leaving you."

Mary had laughed and protested her competence to look after herself.

"That's all very well," said Janet firmly, adding to herself: "What you want, child, is a nice husband, but the Lord knows where he's to come from."

In the end a genuine aunt had promised her company for the winter, and Janet's last qualms were allayed.

Of course, when you are twenty, wounds heal quickly. At Tehran Mary had told herself that all desire had gone out of her life. She would creep home, and perhaps, if she could find plenty to occupy her thoughts, there would be intervals of oblivion. More than these she neither asked nor expected. Yet, as time blunted the edge of the shock, she found her old zest flowing back as slowly but as surely as the incoming tide. There had been the bustle of business following her return, the excitement of rediscovering Stavrock, then the further interest of reopening it, and, with the help of a capable agent, learning some of the secrets of estate management; old friends to be looked up and new friends to be found. The time had come when she was half-ashamed to find how much life still held for her, how frequent those intervals of oblivion had become, how rare the moments of remembrance. Even Janet, watching closely, was satisfied. Now, if only the right man would appear, to replace the memory of that handsome wastrel, Major Aylmer Custance! That, too, in the fullness of time, might come to pass.

Meanwhile, two tiny troubles remained to disturb Janet's satisfaction. The first was that dear man, David Faversham, whom Mary still resolutely and unaccountably declined to discuss. One of these days Janet promised herself that she would probe that trouble, for David was a good friend and Janet was rather fond of making matches in her spare moments.

The other care was less tangible and more puzzling. Just lately Mary's convalescence had seemed to slacken, to falter, as it were, in its steady stride. There was something—some check, just perceptible to an eye as keen as Janet's, something tiny and trivial, but something. It was troubling her, holding her back: of

that Janet was certain, with an instinct which had never failed her. At last she asked Mary point-blank if anything was the matter, and Mary's disclaimer had not quite laid her fears.

As it happened, Janet's judgment was not at fault. There was something. It had begun, absurdly enough, with a letter which Mary, coming down early to breakfast one morning had found waiting for her. The envelope, of thin white paper, was addressed in a strange, angular hand, in an ink of that violet tint to which foreigners are partial. A little puzzled, she had opened it.

"DEAR MISS PLINN (she had read),

"I regret the necessity to remind you of painful events. Shortly before the unfortunate outbreak in Sogdiana, in which your esteemed father so lamentably lost his life, I am sorry to say that he was concerned with the man who styled himself Dewan to the Emir in abstracting from the palace an object of great and historic value. It is not my desire to pass any reflection upon a dead man which might wound the natural feelings of his daughter. I write to you, because I learn on good authority that when you left the country you took with you this object in your care. I must therefore demand that you now restore it to its rightful owners, the people of Sogdiana.

"I shall not yet indicate the nature of the pressure I am prepared to exert should you refuse my request. I shall merely add that the object should be placed in a sealed package and sent under an outer cover addressed to

FELIX WRENCH,
33, Stewart Square,
Bloomsbury,
London.

"I am, yours truly,
LEON BUKHOLIN,
Adviser to the Soviet Republics of
Sogdiana and Samarkand.

"I do not recommend you to apply to the police. Such action might have unpleasant consequences—for you and for the memory of your father."

Mary read this epistle through slowly, a little frown corrugating her forehead. She took it to her bedroom and read it again. Then, unlocking a red case, she drew from it another letter, in dear, familiar writing, that last message from her father which David had carried to her across the mountains.

"You must keep that little bag, my dear, until the right person comes to claim it. It's not my secret, as you know, and if ever anyone should question you about it—though I hardly imagine anyone would—go to David and to no one else."

That, more than any minatory postscript, put the police out of court.

But what was it? What did it all mean? It was unreal, as though the shadow of some half-forgotten dream had returned to her consciousness. It touched things that had happened so many thousands of years ago, so many thousands of leagues away—in another life and in another world. Yet there was that little leather bag to remind her that it was real, and here, and now. The cheek, the frightful cheek of this—this Bukholin! When surely he was the man, the identical man—and as she fixed him her teeth closed in a vicious little snap. That he—the murderer of Aylmer, of her father—should have the insolence to ask a favour of her; if it was a favour: there were passages in his letter which read like a threat. Well, favour or threat, it was all one. He should have nothing, nothing, nothing! She was about to tear the letter in shreds, but, instead, locked it away in a drawer. Then, her decision made, she returned to the breakfast-table.

But the matter did not end there. Three months passed, and another letter came. It was short and to the point.

"Unless the object is sent to the address I gave you,

I shall come to fetch it myself, and you will suffer for this inconvenience. I am travelling to Europe soon, but as I have affairs *en route*, my progress will be slow. To remind you of your duty and my intention you shall hear from me from time to time. Directly you comply, I shall be notified and trouble you no more. For the second time, be warned that I am serious."

Mary read this second letter with a tiny twinge of discomfort. Fantastic, impossible, melodramatic as were the man's threats, in a deep corner of her mind she half believed in them. In daylight, in lovely, placid, Stavrock, with familiar, friendly faces about her, they still seemed unreal, the creatures of some nightmare. But in darkness, when she was alone, she was not so sure. The man had said that he would come. Perhaps he would. Then what was she to do? The police might be inspired to visit that address in Bloomsbury, but the police were taboo. Even without her father's warning, the thought of a vile charge, lightly brought against his memory, would have ensured her silence. Bukholin knew that very well; indeed, he had written nothing that could not be construed as merely a threat to take legal proceedings if "stolen" property were not returned. So what was she to do? "Go to David," her father had written. But there was a reason why she could not go to David, quite apart from the excellent reason that David seemed to have disappeared. "And to no one else," her father had added, which ruled out Janet or the Campions. So there was nothing for it but to sit tight and to hope that her common-sense was right and that disquieting flicker of instinct wrong.

Then the postcards began to arrive. The first had come from Batum, the next from Damascus, then Smyrna, then Constantinople, ordinary crudely coloured views of places of interest to tourists, and always in the corner, violet-inked, the initials "L. B.," set in a monogram.

It was silly, almost laughable; but not quite. When

Bill Campion had pounced on one of the cards and demanded her correspondent's name, Mary had answered him half in jest; but only half. The thing was beginning to get just a little on her nerves. Perhaps that was Bukholin's intention. Perhaps he hoped that these postcards, marking as it were the milestones of his westward journey, would undermine her resolution; that, as the threat drew nearer and ever nearer, the suspense would wear her down. It was a threat like a tiny cloud on the horizon—a mere tuft of cotton-wool, which yet would spread until it hid the sky.

So, as the days slipped by, Mary found herself longing for someone with whom to share this trouble. So short a time ago she would not have lacked confidants. Now there was no one. She was alone.

Even Aunt Janet was leaving in a week's time. Mary was to join her in Scotland in August, and, of course, if Bukholin deferred his visit overlong he might arrive to find the Abbey shut and his quarry gone. There was hope in that thought, but not very much. The postcard on which Bill had commented that May afternoon had reached her from Vienna, and from Vienna to Stavrock was no long journey. If only David . . . but that was an idle hope.

(3)

That evening a fellow-traveller of Janet's and old acquaintance of Janplin's arrived at the Abbey for the night. Over the dinner-table he asked for news of David Faversham.

"We've not had a word of him for months," declared Janet.

"Ah, I thought he might be back. I heard he had trekked off to the North-East Frontier to dally with the Bebejya Michmis."

"Who are they?" inquired Mary.

"Funny little chaps who live in the back parts of Indo-China. They collect heads, and keep slaves, and go in for other practices displeasing to the Government

of India. Faversham was sent to reason with 'em. Nice sort of job."

No more had been said, but that night Janet, the conversation and her own impending departure in mind, brought her resolution to a head. She followed Mary to her bedroom.

"You know," she began in her direct way, establishing herself in an armchair, "I'm thinking you've got something up against David over that business at Sogdiana."

Mary was silent.

"When all's said," Janet went on, "David only did what your father told him to do. If I know the man at all, he would have given his soul to stay on."

"I don't think it was quite like that," said Mary slowly. "In fact, I—I know. It was between him and Aylmer—one to go and one to stay. And he went."

"Because your father told him to go."

"Because he chose to go."

Janet snorted. "Now from where did you get that crazy idea into your head?"

Mary paused before replying. "From a letter Aylmer wrote—the last letter I had from him."

"And you believe it, without question, even if it takes away the good name of your friend? Mary, I'm amazed."

"It's not that—only," protested Mary. "Aunt Janet, must we go into all this?"

"Yes," said Janet, "we must. Go on, my dear, and let's have the whole story."

"You see," stammered Mary, "Aylmer always had the idea that David was fond of me, I mean in the same way that *he* was fond of me; and of course it did seem as if—as if——"

"As if David had seized the chance to escape to Tehran and make hay while the sun shone? Mary, do you really believe that?"

"No—yes—I don't know. Aunt Janet, I'd rather not discuss it."

"Maybe, my dear, but we've got to have this straight. Go on."

"You see," said Mary desperately, "it didn't seem loyal to Aylmer to—to be frightfully nice to David when—when Aylmer was dead. I know it sounds silly," she broke off, "but that was my feeling."

"My dear," said Janet gravely, "doesn't it occur to you that you can be unjust to the living by being too kind to the dead?"

"I know, I know," cried Mary. "I don't want to be unjust to David. I really don't. But that's how I feel."

Janet was silent, grappling with a great decision. Then, with a shake of her grizzled curls, she flung from her the last shreds of her reluctance.

"I'm going to tell you something, Mary; something that's going to hurt you; something I wouldn't have told you if I could fairly have kept silent. I once promised David I'd not say a word of it to you. I thought then, and I think now, that we were wrong. So listen, my dear, and don't forget that the best of us are poor creatures."

With this preface she told Mary the story which once on a time she had told David in his little room at the old Russian Residency—the story of Aylmer Custance and Eleanor Greatorex.

She told it with hesitations, her head lowered that she might not see the pain in Mary's eyes. Once the girl interrupted her fiercely.

"I don't want to hear this."

"My dear, it's right you should hear it. Wait till you know everything."

"I don't believe it," flamed Mary.

Janet went on, remorselessly, with her tale. When she had finished there was a long silence, and Janet, at last looking up, saw a white face staring past her.

"It's hateful, horrible. That he—Aylmer. . . . Aunt Janet, I can't—I won't believe it." But this time her voice rang with less conviction.

"Mary, you've got to believe it. You know I'd not be speaking if I wasn't sure."

"The girl imagined it, exaggerated it."

"There's the letter he wrote her. Do you want to see it?"

"No, no, no," moaned Mary. "Aunt Janet, why, why did you tell me this?"

"Because, my dear, you were not being fair. I wanted you to know this, that I went to Sogdiana meaning, if I possibly could, to break your engagement. David wouldn't let me. He was thinking of your father first, but he was also thinking of you, Mary. He wanted to spare your father this extra worry, and you the unhappiness until it was unavoidable. That was generous of him—if he was in love with you himself."

"Yes, it was," conceded Mary in a strained little voice.

"And I don't think that the man who was generous enough for that was mean enough to act as you suspect him of having acted. Do you?"

Mary shook her head, and silence fell again. Presently Janet saw that the girl had turned away from her and that her shoulders were shaking a little.

Very quietly Janet rose, stood for a moment in doubt, and then stole across to the door But before she could open it Mary turned and spoke:

"Aunt Janet, I—I like David for not wanting to tell me."

With that Janet left her, for her task was done and at the moment her room was better than her company. She mounted the stairs to her own quarters with a sore heart. Yes, the child might like David for not telling, but assuredly at the moment she was not liking her Aunt Janet for telling. Well, so be it, reflected that lady with a grim shrug of her shoulders. She had done her duty. She had killed the knight in shining armour; and one day, perhaps, Mary might be grateful for even that.

CHAPTER III

APPROACH

(1)

NO one enjoys feeling thoroughly unreasonable, and Mary, normally the fairest of persons, enjoyed the sensation rather less than most people. Embedded deep down in the misery of the next few days was a dull resentment against Aunt Janet, the person whom she loved and admired and leaned upon before all others. Now if the tale of Eleanor Greatorex were true—and in her heart Mary knew it to be true—it was absurd to bear a grudge against Aunt Janet for telling her something that she had every claim to be told. Yet there was the grudge, and with it that consciousness of being thoroughly unreasonable.

It was not merely that the picture she had carried of Aylmer was now blurred and muddied out of recognition, but that Janet's midnight disclosure had transformed the girl's outlook on life. David had once spoken of her enchanted garden. The garden, it is true, had been violated and trodden underfoot and defiled on the day when news came to Tehran; but some poor vestiges had lingered on, not as a garden, but as the memory of a garden. That, too, was now gone, conjured out of existence by a few dour words. And nothing was left but a desolating sense of loneliness.

As the day for Janet's departure North drew near, Mary longed to say just those few words that would put her right: "Aunt Janet, I've been a pig. Will you stay on a little longer?" Or just, "I wish you'd put

off going for a little while." Not much, but enough to send that lady bustling upstairs to unpack her trunks. Not much, but Mary could not bring herself to say it. That stubborn lump of resentment kept her tongue-tied; and the last days of Janet's stay at the Abbey were charged with constraint for both.

Meanwhile, someone perhaps was drawing a little closer to Stavrock; someone who would break into Mary's loneliness as a thief breaks into a house; someone whose approach was no more endurable for its uncertainty.

(2)

Mary's sense of disquiet might have been sharpened could she have witnessed a little gathering in Vienna on the evening of the day when a picture postcard of the Hofburg was delivered in Stavrock. The place of meeting was a small restaurant in a back street. For obvious reasons the more fashionable resorts were avoided. At the Palastenhaus, for instance, the proprietress was reactionary and fastidious; there were clients whom she would hustle incontinently into the street; and on the doorstep a posse of police would be found in waiting. But the little *Gasthaus* in the Magalien-strasse was the kind of place where no questions were asked and memories were conveniently short; so that the select company which assembled there on that May evening could celebrate a happy reunion without fear of interruption.

There was the little batch of Hungarians: Kunfi, who in the good old days of Bela Kun had been minister for something or other—no one quite knew what, but there was plenty of desultory shooting attached to it; Bohm, a person with a pretty, if slightly grisly, sense of humour, who had actually been in charge of the famous Death Train; and Czerny, a handsome fellow, with a chin and a forehead receding sharply from squat nose and blubber lips, flanked by heavy protuberant ears, who had been O.C. Lenin

Boys. Then there was Otto Behn from Bavaria, and Anna Stahlstein, a lady with passionate eyes and short black hair, who was understood to have been the bosom friend of the lamented Rosa Luxemburg. There was a Galician Jew who spat with more frequency than care, and there were one or two other gentlemen whose fatherlands were as numerous as the quarterings of an archduke. Three things they had in common—a profound mutual distrust; a determination to avoid their respective native lands for their own (and incidentally for the said lands') good; and a desire to welcome Comrade Leon Bukholin, fresh from his triumphs in Sogdiana.

The fare was lavish, as befits the festal board of Sons of the Revolution; and, the meal finished, the company sat on with loosened attire and unrestrained hiccoughs to refresh themselves with copious draughts of sweet red wine from the vineyards of Hungary.

Bukholin, a little bored and perhaps a little repelled by the grossness of his associates, was leaning back in his chair, staring at the chandelier overhead and speaking as though to himself.

"To-morrow," he was saying, "I go to Rotterdam, and from Rotterdam to England."

"England!" exclaimed Otto Behn in surprise. "What do you want with England, Comrade?" The gesture with which he accompanied these words indicated that England was a country for which, from a revolutionary point of view, he had very little use. "The so-called leaders of Labour," he added, "are impostors. Scratch them, and you find bourgeois. Lean on them, and—phut!—down they go."

The Galician let loose a positive waterspout of depreciatory saliva.

"I go to England," repeated Bukholin softly, "on business. I owe a visit to—a certain lady."

"A woman!" A volley of guffaws went round the table, and Red Anna bridled at the idea of making so long a journey for so simple an object. Bohm offered

some reflections on women in general, culled from his own varied experience, and Kunfi began a long story of a charmer, reputed English, with whom he had once enjoyed some weeks of pseudo-connubial existence in Bukharest.

Bukholin lowered his eyes and looked round him with a tired smile. "You are mistaken, Comrades," he said. "My business with this particular lady is—business."

Incredulity greeted this remark, and Bohm suggested with a leer that business could often be profitably combined with pleasure.

Bukholin emptied his glass and became a trifle more expansive. He drew from his pocket a crumpled photograph that had once stood silver-framed on a writing-table in Sogdiana, and passed it from grimy hand to grimy hand amid suggestive comment.

"The lady," explained Bukholin, becoming unusually communicative, "has something to give me; at least, something which I think—I rather think—she will give me when I have the pleasure of seeing her."

This was evidently a joke. There were chuckles and hoarse ejaculations. What a character the Comrade was, with his dainty ways and his fine language, and yet, all the time . . . ! "Ah," they told each other, "undoubtedly she will give it to Bukholin when she sees him. Most surely she will."

"And if she refuses?" demanded Otto.

Bukholin smiled nastily and cryptically.

"Do the Comrades in England know of your visit?" inquired another.

"Certainly. I need their help, especially if—the lady is difficult."

"Pah!" growled Kunfi. "She will give you what you want. And what then, Comrade?"

"What then?" repeated Bukholin, leaning back again in his chair and watching the upward drift of the smoke from his cigarette. "Well, when does a woman cease talking?"

"When she is dead," came the answer in unison; and Bukholin made a little gesture of assent.

(3)

Janet detested railways almost as heartily as she detested Americans. "A horse for me," she would say, "then a camel, and then my flat feet; but I'll thank you not to put me in a railway carriage." It was scarcely feasible to travel on camel-back from Stavrock in Wilts to Cairns in the Pentlands, and only a little more practicable to make the journey by horse or afoot; which explained the presence on a morning early in June of a large car, laden with luggage, outside the front door of Stavrock Abbey. Now it might be supposed that Janet, with her peculiar views and her ample means, would possess something rather special in the way of cars—a Rolls-Royce, or at least a Sunbeam. Not a bit of it. She had an ancient Renaud, in which, sitting very high and upright like Boadicea in her chariot, she performed journeys of amazing length under circumstances of unusual discomfort. In its day the Renaud had been quite a good car, but its day had been some time before the War and its virtues had become purely traditional. So had its springs. Rorison, her Scots chauffeur, had strained a Presbyterian conscience to breaking-point in courting some convenient accident that would dispose of the car without simultaneously disposing of his mistress and himself. But it was all to no purpose. The car might lose a little paint and Rorison a little of his reputation, but, like Galileo's world, it still moved, and Rorison's naturally urbane temper was becoming permanently soured by the ribald comments of his fellow-chauffeurs.

Janet, coming down the Abbey steps, was conscious of a sudden disquiet. As she looked round on a cloudless sky, on golden-starred meadows, on hedges white with may as with new snow, and on the sleepy cattle in the park, she found her feeling hard to explain.

It was all so quiet, so ordered, so utterly English. And yet . . .

She turned to Mary, the constraint of the last few days dropping from her at this moment of parting. "Then you'll be coming to Cairns the first week in August. Oh, my dear, I hope you're going to be all right."

"Why not?" smiled Mary.

"But of course you are. Rorison, if that hatbox falls off, I'll not forgive you." She gave Mary a couple of affectionate pecks and settled herself in the back seat. The engine began to roar like a wild beast, the gears rasped and clanked, the brake crashed forward, and the car, after a few hiccoughing lurches, rumbled jerkily off over the gravel.

Mary stood in the sunlight looking after it.

In the park Mr. Constantine, the black-bearded tenant of the Priory Farm, was working at his easel. As the car roared past, she saw him rise and remove his hat with a wide sweep of his arm. He was still standing when the tail of the car disappeared through the lodge gates.

(4)

The days of early summer slipped by. June had entered with a hush, in weather so perfect that not a cloud stained the sky and not a breath stirred the great beeches. Stavrock, lulled to a deeper slumber by the hum of summer, dreamed on through days of flaming beauty and short starlit nights. The orchards had shaken off their blossom, but the may was still on the hedges, and in the Abbey garden the June roses, like kings before their armies, flung their challenges across the colour and glory of a parade.

As Mary wandered among her borders or trod the shaven turf that sloped to the Avon's edge, looking across shimmering sun-soaked meadows to the cool depths of the Havilden Woods, forebodings, strangely

ill-matched to her surroundings, would come to her. Sometimes, she fancied, it was almost as if something were following her, from tree to tree and from bush to bush, creeping after her, waiting for the unguarded moment when it might strech forth lean fingers to touch her and break the enchantment of the place; as though beneath the high serenity of a summer day was some expectant horror. She would tell herself that it was nerves, that she was being silly, that it was not good to live alone. Then she would ring up Havilden Hall and bring down a posse of Campions to tea and tennis. Or she would pile a basket with fresh-cut flowers and pay a visit to old Mrs. Thorold in the village. Often, in the daylight hours, she was able to laugh at her disquiet. What was it that troubled her? Her loneliness? This man Bukholin with his stupid postcards and his melodramatic threats? Ridiculous. This was the twentieth century, England, Wiltshire. What could he do? Nothing. In such a mood as this, defiant, half in jest, she once went up to her room and took from a jewel-case a little, shabby bag, which she hung round her neck. It was the hoisting of her battle flag. So much for Bukholin—by daylight.

But in the long evenings, when she would sit at a window in the fading light, with a book or some work, she would catch herself listening with taut nerves to the noises of the old house, a creak in the long corridors or a scuffle behind the wainscot of the darkening room; to the cry of an owl or the swift flutter of a low-flying bat. She would give a little sigh of relief when the old French clock on the mantelpiece chimed ten and she would creep, almost stealthily, upstairs. Nerves, of course, just nerves.

Of course she might go away. The idea had often occurred to her and been, as often, dismissed. She was not going to give in to this thing, to let her fancies drive her from her home.

Yet a day came when she could no longer scold herself into courage. Late one afternoon, passing the

big hall from the garden, she saw a postcard waiting for her on the table—a slip of white on silver, against a background of dark, polished oak. For a full minute she stood looking at it, unwilling even to touch it. Then, with an effort, she took it up. There were those hatefully familiar violet initials; and this time, above them, had been added two words, "The last." Her fingers were trembling as she turned the card over. Rotterdam! So he was as near as that. In a rush of revelation she faced the truth. This—and nothing but this—was what had been haunting her during these summer days. The man was coming. He would keep his promise. There was a sureness in that slow, recorded journey that nothing could shake. The stages rang in her head like the strokes of a warning bell—Batum, Damascus, Smyrna, Constantinople, Budapest, Vienna, Rotterdam. He was coming, drawing nearer and nearer with the steady march of fate.

The certainty struck her with the force of a blow, and in a moment she was struggling with panic. What was she to do? Where was she to go? The man might be here in two days, the very next day even. The police? No. The Campions? No again. The servants? There was Humphreys, with his "Yes, Miss Mary," and "No, Miss Mary," and "Certainly, Miss Mary." She could see bewilderment stealing over his gentle old face at a hint of approaching danger. And there were the maids, who would scream and scream and scream. . . . Useless. She must leave, get out of all this, escape somewhere, anywhere.

With a little sob she turned and ran back into the garden. In the panic that was now sweeping her she was sure that the avenger had already come. The garden, at least, held no long corridors or dark corners where a man might hide; there she would be in the open, with the sun shining and Parkin or an under-gardener at work near by.

So she sped blindly over the grass and through a little gate to a broad walk between the high hedges.

Anxiously she looked round for Parkin. If she could see him, exchange a word or two with him, his company and homely talk might deaden that awful sense of pursuit. So she dodged about, hunting for a glimpse of that welcome figure. But he was not there: he must have gone home to tea. Mary stood still, despair wrapping her round. She was alone in the garden, and that man. . . .

And then she was rooted to the ground by a noise that came to her over a wall of early sweet peas. It was the click of a gate; and as she strained to listen she thought she could just hear the soft pad of footsteps and the faintest crackle of gravel. Someone, rubber-soled, had entered the garden. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came save a little choking moan. She tried to run, but her heart was thumping like an engine and her legs were shaking. A deadly sickness settled on her, and she thought she was going to faint. There! The subdued crunch of gravel came distinctly to her.

"Hullo!"

With a great gasp of relief she saw, fifteen yards away, the freckled face, the sandy, hatless head, and the flannel-clad form of Bill Campion.

She ran to him with unsteady steps. "Oh, Bill," she panted, "it's you, it's you. I thought—I was afraid——" She clutched at his sleeve.

"Mary!" Bill's face was clouded with concern. "Why, what's the matter? Mary!"

Mary had broken into a storm of sobbing, her head hidden in Bill's blazer. The relief, the blessed relief. . . .

Bill, with an arm flung round her, half-carried her to a seat, mumbling broken sympathy and exhortation.

"I say, Mary . . . buck up, old thing. I say, what *is* up? . . . Mary, for the Lord's sake . . ."

She began to feel better. At last, gulping down her sobs, she leaned back and, dabbing an inadequate handkerchief at her streaming eyes, plunged into incoherent apologies.

"Sorry, Bill. . . . I'm an idiot. What must you think? Cry-baby. Never happened to me before. Oh, Bill, I'm so glad you came. Though you'll despise me. I'm simply ashamed. . . ."

Bill got up and confronted her, hands in pockets, very square and determined.

"Now look here," he said, "you've got to tell me what the trouble is."

Mary shook her head weakly.

"Yes, you have," persisted Bill. "Something's been bothering you for weeks. What is it? Come on, cough it up."

Mary was silent.

"It's to do with that picture postcard blighter," continued Bill with insight. "Now then, let's have it. I'm not leaving you till I know."

Mary shuddered at the mere suggestion of being left, and nodded her head.

"What does he want?" demanded Bill.

"Bill, I really oughtn't to tell you."

"Rot. Come on. Out with it."

Another thread of Mary's obstinacy snapped. "You see," she explained, "he's threatening to come here."

"But what's the idea?"

"He—he wants me to give him something—something I can't give him. So he says he's coming to fetch it. Oh, it does sound silly, put like that."

"Go on."

"Every postcard was sent off from a place a little nearer England. I suppose he intended to frighten me. And I suppose he has," she added with a pale little smile.

"Poisonous swine!" commented Bill. "We'll turn the police on to him."

"No, you mustn't. That was a—a promise."

"Curiouser and curiouser. All right. We cut out the police. Go on."

"And this afternoon, when I was beginning to feel rather horrible about it, another postcard arrived—

from Rotterdam. He had written 'The last' on it, and I suddenly felt I couldn't bear it any longer."

"And then I blew in." Bill did some quick thinking. "Now look here, Mary, you've got to come home with me."

"To Havilden? But——"

"Yes. Mother will love having you, and obviously you can't stop on here with this blighter cruising about. I'll ring her up and break the glad news at once."

"But, Bill . . ."

"No 'buts,'" said Bill masterfully. "If you won't come to Havilden, I shall stop here, and just ring up for my pyjamas and toothbrush. That'll make a horrid scandal in the county."

"Oh, all right," said Mary with unusual meekness. It was unexpectedly comforting to be ordered about and have your plans arranged for you.

"Right. That's settled. Come along. While I'm telephoning you can be collecting your things. Then I'll run you up in the Morris."

"Bill, you're rather a lamb," said Mary as they walked towards the house.

CHAPTER IV

THE PACK

(1)

WHEN for seven years you have had sole charge of a large and turbulent family, you do not allow yourself to be easily disturbed by events; and Mrs. Campion, after a brief and bewildering conversation with her eldest son, placidly gave orders for a bedroom to be got ready.

"Of course, we're delighted to have you, Mary," she said in welcoming her, "though I couldn't make out what Bill was talking about. But perhaps it's just that I'm bad on the telephone."

On the way up Bill had extracted permission to share with his family such meagre information as Mary had given him. Mrs. Campion, a slightly confused lady, found his bald narrative very puzzling, and ended, as was her way, in jumping at a totally wrong conclusion and clinging to it with desperate tenacity.

"Of course, it's very unpleasant for you, dear," she said to Mary. "This man—you say he's a foreigner—has no business to follow you about and worry you. When he comes I shall see him myself and explain to him that in England that sort of thing isn't done."

"Yes, but, Mrs. Campion——" began Mary feebly.

"Foreigners are funny in that way," continued Mrs. Campion firmly. "Why, Bill, when your father and I were on our honeymoon at Paris, there was a man in the hotel—a perfect stranger—who spoke to me without any encouragement. It was most disagreeable; your father was furious and wanted to make a scene."

"We're going to make a scene all right when this chap rolls up," Bill assured her.

"No, Bill," insisted Mrs. Campion, "that wouldn't do at all. You must leave him to me." Already the phrases of her reproof to the importunate foreigner were forming in her head.

"Mary doesn't want the police called in," remarked Bill, who had just delivered himself of a large and undutiful wink.

"The police! What an idea! My dear boy, of *course* not. We want as little fuss as possible, and if the police get to hear of it, probably it will be in the papers. No. If the young man—you did say he was young, Mary, didn't you?—refuses to take his *congé* from me, I shall ask the Vicar to speak to him. But not the police. Naturally Mary does not wish that. I *quite* understand."

Mary felt that a little more of this would drive her mad. "Darling Mrs. Campion," she said, "you don't understand, really you don't. It's—it's—oh dear, oh dear . . ." She began to giggle hysterically.

"Now, Mary," said Mrs. Campion, a little shocked, "you're quite sure you *don't* want to see this man when he comes?"

"Absolutely certain. I—I've never seen him in my life."

"That makes his conduct even more objectionable. He can't be at all a nice man. Bill, there's nothing to laugh at. I must say I don't quite grasp—anyhow, my dear, here you are, and you know we're all very fond of you and aren't going to let anyone bother you. What you want is a good rest, and if you'd rather I said nothing to the Vicar I won't. There!"

Mary decided to leave it at that. A little knowledge might be a dangerous thing, but the further enlightenment of Mrs. Campion was not to be faced at the moment. So, with a grateful hug to her hostess, she vanished, under Bill's escort, to her bedroom.

(2)

During the night the weather at last broke. A south-westerly gale came roaring up over the high flats of Salisbury Plain, slashing the rain against the walls and windows of Havilden Hall. It had set in to be a wet day, and even the twins, deferring a damp but exciting game of "pirates," played in and out of the Avon and mainly at the expense of Mary's black-bearded tenant, resigned themselves philosophically to staying indoors.

Consequently, when Bill, over the remains of breakfast, proclaimed in a solemn voice a meeting of the Pack, there was no competing attraction. Since Bill had begun to put away childish things as unbefitting the dignity of his years, formal meetings of the Pack had become infrequent. They were still held, for the encouragement or suppression of the twins, or for planning some such lawful enterprise as a picnic or a cricket match, but the proceedings in becoming respectable had lost much of their old charm.

The morning's meeting announced by Bill, however, looked like a return to the old order of things, to the palmy days when the Palairets, a couple of miles off, had been regularly raided, when poaching expeditions into West Woods had been planned and executed, and when the local policeman had been constrained to appeal to his superiors for help in dealing with a sudden outbreak of lawlessness in Stavrock.

This morning there was to be a full attendance, including an honorary member, Mary Plinn, now referred to (under protest) as the Distressed Damsel; and the place of meeting, as tradition demanded, was the old schoolroom. There, after breakfast, the Pack assembled. Mary was planted in *the* armchair (only a leg was missing), and by her side Bill, perpetual leader of the Pack, sat upright and business-like. In one window-seat was Peggy, seventeen and only lately

grown out of the grievance of being born a girl. In the other was Jim, lately of Winchester, and shortly (if the examiners willed) to be of New College. He was a darker and slighter edition of his elder brother and took life very much more seriously; in fact, he had a little of the anxious air of a keen fox-terrier. At the moment he was hunched up, hands clasping knees, showing six inches of bare leg at the point where sock and trouser should have met. The twins made up the quorum, drifting restlessly about the room, generally on the floor and never in the same place for more than a couple of minutes.

"The business before the meeting," began Bill in a brisk voice, "concerns the Distressed Damsel." He waved an airy hand at Mary.

"I will *not* be called by that odious name," she declared. "And look here, Bill, it's all very well for you to turn this into a rag."

"Order!" proclaimed Jim autocratically. "I say, you mustn't interrupt. Rule 3. Go on, Bill."

"The Distressed Damsel," Bill resumed, "is being menaced, threatened, pursued and harried by an unknown blighter who corresponds with her on picture postcards."

"Why?" demanded Jim.

"Why what?"

"Why pursued and all the rest of it?"

"The Distressed Damsel refuses to disclose the unknown's motive for his peculiar conduct."

"We might *torture* her till she told us," suggested Colin hopefully.

"Further," said Bill, "the gentleman in question uses a peculiarly atrocious violet ink."

"Let's suppress him," put in Jim. "How shall we do it, Bill? Chuck him in the river?"

"I'll plug him in the guts with my air-gun," growled Micky fiercely, borrowing an idea from one of his favourite authors.

Mary got up. "Evidently you all think this is a

huge joke," she said. "I suppose something's gone wrong with my sense of humour, but I can't see it quite like that. Still, you can go on being funny without me, can't you?" She moved towards the door.

"Don't pay any attention to them," broke in Peggy, springing up. "They're beasts, Mary. I'll come with you."

The Pack at once overflowed with contrition. Let Mary stay, they protested, and judges would be frivolous folk by comparison with the Campions.

"It was Bill's fault," protested Jim. "I honestly thought it was one of his rags."

"Sorry," said Bill.

Two indignant girls glowered at him.

"Thanks," replied Mary, "but I don't think I'll play, all the same. It's obvious you think——"

The door opened.

"Miss Plinn's wanted on the telephone by the Abbey."

Mary vanished.

"You might have had more sense, Bill," said Peggy reproachfully. "I don't know what it's all about, but anyone can see Mary's frightfully upset."

"I know," agreed Bill ruefully. "That's just why I started fooling round. Thought it would make it easier for her."

"You're a great goat," Peggy told him placidly. "I'm off."

"Fact is, Jim my son," remarked Bill, as his sister departed, "the female sex has suddenly got on top in this house. When it comes to Pegs starting to throw her weight about, it's time we did something."

"But what *does* it all mean?" asked Jim.

"Hanged if I know yet. But I'm jolly well going to—soon."

Sooner perhaps than he expected, for at that moment the girls returned. Mary, looking a little white, stepped forward. "Bill, Humphreys has rung up to

tell me that the Abbey was broken into last night. I—I must go down at once."

Bill whistled under his breath. "Right you are," he replied cheerfully. "I'm with you. I'll get my 'mack' and wait for you in the hall."

The meeting dissolved amid excited ejaculations from the twins, and questions from Jim which no one stopped to answer.

(3)

The rain was still pelting down when Bill and Mary swung round the corner by the lodge gates of the Abbey. Just outside they passed Mr. Constantine, the complete Bohemian, in a large, flapping hat (now waterlogged) and a long tweed cloak. His full black beard was glistening with rain. He had evidently been shopping in the village and was on his way home. He swept off his hat with one of his exaggerated gestures.

"What a terrible morning!" he called to Mary.

"Isn't it? I hope the water's not coming in at your place."

"Not a drop," replied the artist. "By the way, they tell me you had trouble at the Abbey last night."

"Yes," replied Mary, "burglars, I believe. I'm just going in to inquire about it."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" exclaimed Mr. Constantine in concern. "To think of such a thing occurring in a place like this! It's too bad. Well, I trust our worthy local police will bring the criminals to justice. I hope they've not taken much of value."

"I don't think so."

"Ah, good, good." Off went his hat again, and he flapped on down the road.

"Odd creature," commented Bill, as he and Mary turned up the short drive.

"Yes. Mr. Hedges calls him my windfall. He's taken the Priory Farm for three months, and since the

Andersons left we hadn't been able to get another tenant for the place: it's such a backwater."

At the Abbey door Humphreys, much flustered, was hovering.

"Oh, Miss Mary," he exclaimed, "what a thing to happen! It's a mercy you was up at the 'All, it is indeed. I 'ope you don't think I've been remiss."

"Tell me all about it," said Mary, slipping out of her wet mackintosh.

"It was Ellen, that girl of Mrs. Skinner's, as found it. She went up to your bedroom, Miss Mary, about 'arf-past nine, just to set it straight, you being away, and found it all upside down. She came back scared out of 'er wits and told me, and I rang up the police, and then the 'All, and then Mr. 'Edges."

"Quite right," commended Mary. "Has anything much been taken?"

"Nothing below, Miss Mary. I've been through the silver myself and it's all there. Seems as if it was just your things they was after. Mr. Buzzard's in your room now, if you'll step upstairs."

"How did they get in?" asked Bill.

"They forced a window in my pantry, sir, overlooking the old part. And a quiet job they made of it, too, for there was I next door and a light sleeper, and not a sound did I 'ear."

"Always struck me there were about fifty ways of breaking into your home, Mary," remarked Bill. You really ought to turn Hedges on to overhauling it."

At the threshold of her room Mary paused with a cry of consternation. They had come upon a scene of havoc. It was as though a wild beast had been raging through the dainty, well-appointed bedroom. Every drawer had been emptied and its contents flung higgledy-piggledy to the floor. Dresses, torn from the wardrobe, lay strewn about. The bed was stripped; the pillows and mattress had been ripped up, so that down and feathers were scattered about. Every box or case of any sort had been burst open and its contents

tumbled on to the carpet. The room had been thoroughly and systematically wrecked.

In the midst of this litter stood Mr. Buzzard, a patient, puzzled figure in blue, with a notebook in which, as fresh and illuminating thoughts occurred to him, he was making painful entries with a stump of a pencil.

"Good-morning, miss," he said in a funereal voice as Mary entered; "this is a bad business, this is." He shook his head gloomily and caught sight of Bill. "And good-morning to you, sir," he added. "If you'll excuse me saying so, sir, when first I come I sez to myself, I sez, 'Now I wouldn't be surprised if this wasn't one of young Mr. Campion's little games.' Beggin' your pardon, sir, because when I seed this room I sez, 'A joke's a joke, and I wouldn't believe young Mr. Campion would act so mischeevous-like—not in a lady's room 'e wouldn't.'"

"Well, I didn't," said Bill. "So bang goes your first guess, Buzzard, and many thanks for it. Got any other brain-waves?"

Buzzard shook his head. "There's points about this 'ere case," he explained candidly, "as I 'aven't rightly got the 'ang of yet. First of all, Miss, if it ain't putting you out, will you 'ave a look round and see if any o' your property's missing? The inspector from Chippenham 'll be along soon, and I'll be obliged if you'll tread careful so as not to disturb things like afore 'e comes."

For five minutes Mary explored her ruined bedroom, peeping into upturned jewel-cases and ransacked drawers, and searching among the *débris* on the floor.

"No," she reported at last. "Of course it's in an awful mess, but I don't miss anything."

"There you are," said Buzzard triumphantly. "That's wot I'm getting at. They breaks in, they turns the 'ole place topsy-turvy, an' they takes nothing. 'Tain't in reason. Wot's the motive? That's wot I'm arskin' meself."

"Extraordinary," murmured Bill, looking hard at

Mary. "Hullo, here's Hedges—and your inspector, Buzzard."

For another hour they remained at the Abbey.

The inspector, though less ready than Buzzard to admit his perplexity, was quite as much at a loss to explain the mysterious outrage. He examined the bedroom, and the pantry window through which the intruder or intruders had entered, and the ground outside, from which most traces had already been washed by the heavy rain. And he asked Mary a few questions which she demurely answered. Finally, he retired with his notes and an air of secrecy to such refreshment as Humphreys might provide for him.

"What about it?" inquired Bill, who privately thought the investigation was becoming rather futile.

"About what?" answered Mary.

"Lunch. Jim and Peggy have brought the car down for us."

"Bill," said Mary suddenly, as they reached the hall once more, "I believe I should have died with fright if I had been here last night."

"I'm not so sure it would have been fright you'd have died of," replied Bill.

(4)

A second and more informal Council of War assembled in the old schoolroom that evening between tea and dinner.

"I suppose," began Bill, "we are all agreed that the little job at the Abbey last night was the work of the picture postcard merchant."

The meeting concurred with one voice.

"The point is," continued Bill, "did the bloke get what he came for? Mary, it's up to you."

She shook her head. "No, he didn't. I—I've got it on me." She fingered a tiny lump beneath her jumper.

"Very well. It follows that, being a persevering sort of chap who's come the devil of a long way for his purpose, he'll probably have another whack at it."

"It's a dead certainty," put in Jim. "Wonder if he'll try to-night. By Gosh, he'll walk into it if he comes here."

"You know," said Bill, "I don't want to harp on a sore subject, Mary, but if you *could* tell us a little more it would help. After all, the police are in it now, and if any hushing up has to be done, it's as well to know what we've got to hush."

Mary put her hands wearily to her forehead.

"Listen," she said, "and I'll tell you as much as I can. When I was in Sogdiana my father gave me something—something very valuable that doesn't belong to me—to look after, you understand. Somehow or other this man—his name's Bukholin—discovered that I had it and wrote months ago demanding it. I didn't answer. Then he wrote again, threatening to come here and fetch it; and, as he couldn't come right away, I suppose, he's been sending these postcards, every time from a place a little nearer England, to remind me that he meant business. I got the last yesterday from Rotterdam."

"And you've never seen the man?" asked Peggy.

"Never. But I think—I know—who he is. He's the man," Mary added slowly, "who murdered Daddy in Sogdiana."

The Pack digested this information in awed silence.

"I promised Daddy," concluded Mary, "that if there was any trouble I'd go to David—Major Faversham—and no one else: he was on Daddy's staff."

"Where is he now?" asked Bill.

"I don't know. Somewhere right out of the way on the Indian Frontier."

"Well," said Bill, "that certainly clears up a lot. Of course we stand in with you on this." There was a chorus of assent. "You must stay on here. We'll make the house safe at night and rig up an alarm bell

in your room. Keep the door open between you and Peggy: then she'll only have to thump on the wall to bring Jim out. Also, you shall have Bags to sleep with you, and he'll bark to wake the dead at the slightest sound. If the blighter turns up, we'll jump on him good and hard. I think brother James suggested the river."

"But, Bill," said Mary, "you don't realise even now what you may be taking on. The chances are that Bukholin won't be alone."

"It's quite a big river," replied Bill. "Still, that's a point. I'll arrange for Curnick to sleep up at the house for the next few nights, and we'll go to bed with our guns."

"There's one thing," said Jim thoughtfully, "that I don't quite understand. If old Bukholin was hopping across Europe, how could he expect you to send him what he wanted if you changed your mind?"

"I'm crazy," exclaimed Mary. "He gave me an address—33, Stewart Square, Bloomsbury. I was to send anything there."

"Bless his innocent heart!" cried Bill. "To go and leave an address in that trusting way! Mary, that's the most important thing you've let out yet. I'll tell you what"—his forehead crinkled with thought—"I'll buzz up to London to-morrow and have a look at 33, Stewart Square."

When a vain clamour from the twins to be taken to London had subsided, Jim inquired further into Bill's plans when he should reach the genteel neighbourhood of Bloomsbury.

"I shall trust the inspiration of the moment," said Bill promptly but vaguely. "Have a squint round, make inquiries and all that. May find a houseful of crooks and be able to switch the police on to them at once. May find nothing." His confidence was superb.

"Bill, I don't like it," broke in Mary. "I wish you'd stay here."

"Not a hope," said Bill. "The essence of defence

is attack. Bukholin's London address is just a gift from the gods. I'll be at Aunt Aggie's to-morrow night, if you want me."

"You'll be careful?" pleaded Mary.

"Trust me," said Bill.

"I don't."

CHAPTER V

HOME FROM THE HILL

(1)

AT the pleasant hour of six p.m., almost everybody who is anybody in Shillong may be found at the Club. During the late afternoon it has been the universal destination; of the Burra Sahib's Wolseley, before whose august approach pedestrians scatter to the side-walks; of the humble two-seater of the Assistant Collector, rattling and bumping on its aged springs; of the tum-tum driven by the Major's Memsahib, with a smart syce up behind; and of the motor bicycle, bustled noisily along the dusty road by a Gurkha subaltern, with a brother-officer on the pillion; of men on horseback and men on foot; of soldiers, of civilians, of boxwallahs; of their wives, if they have them, and of their lady friends, if they have not.

And, of course, the place and time being what they are, while the Memsahibs chatter in corners of the big drawing-room, their male possessions gravitate by a common instinct to the bar; for it is sundown, when the more careful may quench an accumulated thirst, and the more reckless may let themselves go an extra peg or so with an easy conscience.

There, on an evening in May, you might have seen the usual crowd of men of all ages, ranks and callings, their legs coiled round the high stools on which they are perched, sipping their John Collinses, or their gin and gingers, or their milk punches, or their mixed vermouths, or anything else that they may have fancied; munching crisp potato shavings and olives

and salted almonds; and, between drinks and nibblings and cries of "What's yours?" discussing polo or station politics or their neighbours' characters.

For example, there is that little group of men in the centre, who as early comers have secured the best seats. That long, mahogany-faced fellow on the left, who has just been softly cursing the sweating Goanese behind the bar, has news, and therefore the ears of the company.

"Yes," he is saying, "he'll be in this evening. So Rowlands says, at least. They were dossing together at the forest bungalow at Pendrapat last night."

"Who's 'he'?" inquired a late arrival on the edge of the group, as he stretched for his drink.

"I've told you," said Pellatt, the first speaker. "Faversham. Chap they sent up a year ago to point out to the Bebejya Michmis the errors of their ways. He's coming in to-night."

Some remembered Faversham; some did not.

"Sounds the sort of job a man's lucky to come back from at all," commented one.

"It is," replied Pellatt. "Rotten show. Why can't they leave the little heathen man alone? If it amuses him to keep slaves and collect his neighbours' heads, let him."

"I don't agree," protested a fussy, self-important little person who was sipping a lime-juice and soda and making a square meal off potato shavings. "Don't agree at all, Pellatt. There's such a thing as duty, not to mention prestige."

Pellatt laughed. "If I were you," he said dryly, "I wouldn't mention prestige to Faversham; not if he's in the same mood as when he passed through a year ago."

A young Gurkha broke in on the talk.

"Faversham! Surely he was the chap who was with Plinn at Sogdiana?"

"He was."

"Sticky business! We had a brace of platoons

there and the Bolshies scuppered the lot. Happened just after I joined the regiment."

"An amazing coincidence," remarked Pellatt, who, as an *habitué* of the Club, snubbed his juniors on principle.

"Faversham!" repeated the Gurkha, unruffled. "Didn't he do a bunk or something?"

"He did something," retorted Pellatt, "but not a 'bunk,' unless you call it 'doing a bunk' to travel across three hundred miles of the worst country in the world, with the inhabitants taking potshots at you on the way. That was Faversham's 'bunk' from Sogdiana."

"I didn't know," confessed the Gurkha. "I'd like to see the fellow."

"Your wish is about to be gratified," said Pellatt, twisting on his high stool, and peering through the glass of the doors.

There was a clatter of heavy boots in the passage outside, and the doors swung apart a few inches to admit a tanned face that searched the company for friends.

Several men flung greetings. "Hullo, Faversham." "When did *you* blow in?" "What'll you have?" "Come and join us."

David nodded and smiled to the welcoming faces. "Later," he said. "I'm just off to have a bath and get rid of twelve months' dirt. See you all afterwards."

"Where are you staying?" called Pellatt.

"Here," answered David. "Cheerio." He vanished.

"It's bracing to see his mug again," muttered Pellatt with unwonted warmth. "And as for you, my lad," he added fiercely to the Gurkha, "if you've any more *bukh* to let loose about doing a bunk, you can get it off your chest now."

(2)

It was good to be back again; good to fling off worn clothes, grey with grime and stiff with dried sweat; good to see, through the open door of the *ghussul khana*, the steam rising like the smoke of a burnt sacrifice from a bath so hot that the Club *bhisti* must now squirt into it streams of cold water from his bulging *mussuck;* better still to step in, to feel the almost forgotten sting of hot water, the freshness of the soap, the wallowing luxury of a Real Hot Bath; and best, perhaps, the recollection of friendly faces looking back from the bar, the faces of his own kind, of men who spoke a Christian tongue and wore boots and tucked their shirts inside their trousers.

David lay back and wallowed anew. Funny to think that when he was in Shillong a year back he was not minding much if he ever saw the place—or, for that matter, any damned place—again. The Bebejya Michmis had cured him of *that* all right. His mind flickered back to his late mission. Not bad little chaps, the Michmis, when you got to know them; but they took a bit of knowing. He had had to be very patient and firm and friendly and tactful; and, above all, serenely confident of the hospitality of his hosts, which had been strained to breaking-point by the discovery that he had come to wean them from their most cherished pursuits. One black-avised old ruffian had even conceived an ardent desire to add David's head to his store of trophies. He had become quite boring on the subject, pointing out that a white specimen would crown a really fine collection and be the envy of every rival collector within a hundred miles; besides, of course, being infinitely pleasing to the tribal deities. He pressed the matter so hard that at last David had to speak to him very seriously, inquiring what profit there could be in adding to a collection of heads which the Government of India

had decreed must be dissolved. The chief apparently saw the logic (but not the flaw) in this reasoning, and before David moved on there was a general liberation of slaves and a ceremonial cremation of several hundred heads.

That had been one delicate situation among many, all of which must in due course be recorded and reported for the enlightening of the Government of India and the peculiar benefit of the Heavenborn gentleman who, having sent Major Faversham on a special mission, had since probably forgotten his existence.

Whether any good had been done was another matter. Promises had been made; good resolutions had been formed; but David had a shrewd suspicion that hardly had his back been turned when the funny little Michmis were at their bad old practices again. The dog returns to his vomit, and, whatever Governments may decree, the habits of centuries are not cured by a series of lectures. Well, that, please God! would be someone else's business. He had had his dose of the wilds and now he would try a spell of civilised life for a change. He would stay a week or two at Shillong and work at his report; when it was finished he would present it in person at Simla; then he would apply for leave as soon as the trooping season began; and then—well, he hadn't hunted in England for ten years.

It wasn't such a bad world after all, reflected David, as he sluiced his shoulders with hot water. It had its rubs, its ups and downs, its bad patches; but it had also its compensations. One of them, incidentally, was going to be the feel of clean underwear, and the crackle of a boiled shirt, after a year of pigging it in ragged drill among a lot of half-naked savages. He could hear Hari Singh fussing about his room, laying out his clothes—Hari Singh, who had been patiently waiting at Shillong for the past month to greet his master and get his kit out of store. Hari Singh was another compensation.

And yet a third was the dinner to be eaten that

very evening, for the return must be fitly celebrated. David had already ordered a special menu, comprising those dishes for which the Club had a modest reputation. Yes, by Jove! and he must rope in someone to help him get outside a couple of bottles of champagne. He shouted through the door to Hari Singh:

"Tell Pellatt Sahib he's dining with me in half an hour." Adding, as an afterthought: "And tell the *khansamah* to show him the menu. That'll fetch the old boy," he chuckled to himself.

Then he wrapped himself in a great bath towel, with a rapturous shudder at the caress of its crinkly folds, and stalked back to his bedroom to put on raiment worthy of the Banquet that was to follow the Bath.

(3)

"I've the father and mother of a *dâk* waiting for you," called out the Secretary, as David went by to the dining-room.

"Give it to my bearer, will you?" David called back. "The letters can wait and the dinner can't. Hullo, Pellatt, is your mouth watering?"

"In a quiet way. Having existed in this pothouse for a couple of years, I can hardly hope for surprises from its cuisine."

"Pothouse! You old curmudgeon, it's a palace."

"Possibly I might think so," remarked Pellatt dryly, as he took his seat, "if I had been gadding about the North-East Frontier for twelve months. Now, if you want a meal that is a meal, I commend you to the C.W.I. at Poona. There, if you like——"

"Blow the C.W.I.!" said David boisterously. "Pellatt, I've ordered a dinner to stir even *your* jaded appetite. I say, this soup is good. And, hurray! enter our old friend 'Simkin,' with his golden head peeping out of his ice-bucket. To it, my *blasé* friend, to it."

Pellatt went to it with a tolerant smile. David was

like a schoolboy on an outing; also the dinner really was good. In fact, after the first bottle of 'Simkin' had been sent empty away, Pellatt decided that it was very good.

Later—much later—anchored to the deepest of armchairs and puffing away at a long cigar, David was overcome with sleep. The Michmis, however bad their habits in other respects, keep early hours, and after the day's journeying and the Club's good fare, David found, before ten o'clock struck, that he could hardly keep his eyes open. As he stifled his twentieth yawn Pellatt ordered him off to bed.

"Funny business!" ruminated that cynical gentleman, as he watched his host stumbling sleepily to the door. "Goes off looking as if he hoped something savage would bite his head off, and comes back—like this. Not much wrong with a chap who can enjoy a good dinner, though they do say the pleasures of the table are the last to leave us. Well, well, I suppose we shall soon have the Michmis setting up a convalescent home for hard cases."

He glared ferociously at a subaltern who looked as though he were about to take the liberty of addressing him, lit another cigar, and picked up the latest copy of the *Statesman*.

(4)

After a late breakfast David attacked his formidable mail The bulk of it, as he had expected, was a batch of some fifty letters from his sister and only near relative Anne—dear old Anne, who never missed a mail whether she got an answer or not. There was a little smile on David's face as he put her letters on one side, to be read at leisure. There were a few bills and circulars, three envelopes in Janet's masculine handwriting, half-a-dozen letters from friends, and one or two more from strangers. He turned the pile over again and realised with a tiny ache that half-unconsciously he had been searching for another handwriting which was not there. Not, of course, that he

had really expected to hear from Mary, but all the same . . . Then, as a man will do, he began on the letters whose writing he had not recognised.

The second envelope he took up was addressed in violet ink, and there was something in the pointed script which suggested a foreign correspondent. He tore open the envelope and spread out a flimsy single sheet of notepaper. The letter began without formality:

"I must ask you to restore at once the *Khotash*, now in the possession of Miss Plinn. Unless I hear from you within three months that you are arranging this, I shall address myself to Miss Plinn.

"LEON BUKHOLIN."

That was all. The *Khotash!* The great ruby with a text from the Koran carved upon it, which by tradition must be bound to the brow of the Emir on the day when he mounts the throne of Tamerlane! It had passed clean out of his mind. As he sat, he recalled the night when Janplin had come into the messroom and told him the queer story of how that famous jewel had been smuggled out of the citadel, and how he had entrusted it to Mary to take out of the country. Of course. Moula Buksh had appeared just afterwards, and the tidings he brought had almost banished the *Khotash* from memory. Ancient history now, but how in the world had Bukholin discovered Mary's part in it? Of course he would want the darned thing. Well, he would have to want. Pretty good cheek to write a letter like that after all that had passed. David looked at the date. June 3rd of last year. The fellow had been doing a little wanting already; that is . . . "Unless I hear from you within three months that you are arranging this, I shall address myself to Miss Plinn." Confound the fellow! What did he mean by that? Mary was in England. Wiltshire was not Sogdiana, and if Bukholin imagined he would get any change out of Mary with a begging

letter—or a threatening letter, for that matter—he was wide of the mark. And what, after all, could he do? Nothing, except—no, nothing, David decided. If he dared to molest Mary, he would soon find the police after him. At least—yes, of course he would. Just a bit of bluff, that letter, yet all the same . . .

David turned to Janet's little pile, absent-mindedly opening the latest arrival first. Janet! Bless her! She was writing from Stavrock. "The child has made a fine recovery," he read, "considering the shock she had. The work here has done her a power of good, and though she has her moods, poor darling, they are fewer and further between." Ah, that was good. "Just lately I've fancied something was troubling her, but maybe I'm imagining it. I leave for Cairns in a week, and she's to join me in August. Then I'm off to the East in September. Come home soon, David, and have a crack with me. I've an idea someone's getting over her whimsies and will not be sorry for a sight of you again."

Good old Janet! So *there* was Bukholin's silly threat, and *there* was good news of Mary, with a qualification that might merely be of Janet's imagining, and *there* was a straight hint that all was coming right again. Trust him to follow that up when he got home. Dash it, October was a long way off! Why should he not polish off that report and catch an earlier boat? If he hustled, he could get one about June 15th. Hot? Of course, but that wouldn't kill him, and with any luck the monsoon would have broken. He would be in time to catch Janet before she left for the East. And he could warn Mary about Bukholin's little game. After all, he had promised Janplin to keep an eye on her, and he didn't quite like the thought of a swine like Bukholin messing round. Yes, he would catch that earlier boat; he would catch it if all the Government of India were tugging at his coat-tails.

CHAPTER VI

STEWART SQUARE

(1)

AFTER all, Bill's start for London was delayed. A new and apparently more enlightened representative of the police arrived in Stavrock in the morning, to investigate the outrage at the Abbey, and required Mary's presence. Bill went down with her, partly to keep her company and partly in case anything further had been discovered that might assist him in his reconnaissance of Stewart Square. Nothing had; in fact, much the same questions were asked and answers given as on the previous day, and the mystery remained as profoundly a mystery.

"A whole morning wasted!" exclaimed Bill in disgust, as he and Mary returned to Havilden. "I always thought the police were rotten. Still, I shall catch the two o'clock from Chippenham and be in town by half-past five."

It was at this moment that Mary, metaphorically tearing her hair, proclaimed that she had entirely forgotten an appointment with her dentist in Bath for that very afternoon.

"Let him rip!" suggested Bill calmly. "No catch motoring into Bath on a day like this." Rain was again pouring down.

"I'll go by train," decided Mary. "I'll travel with you as far as Chippenham and catch the 2.30 on. My appointment's at three, so I shall just do it."

"All right," agreed Bill. "Jim will meet you at Stavrock, if you'll let him know what time you'll be back in the evening."

(2)

Certain portions of Bloomsbury are the battle-ground of shabby gentility and commercialism. Two houses out of three maintain the dignity of a private residence behind fronts of peeling plaster and dingy muslin curtains. The third house has purchased re-facing and a coat of paint at the price of admitting an insurance agent, a publisher, or the secretary of some semi-benevolent society.

Number 33, Stewart Square, before which Bill Campion stood on a sunny June morning, had evidently paid the price without receiving value. It was quite the dustiest and most dilapidated building in a dusty and dilapidated square. A mildewed brass plate declared it the place of business of Solomon Park, Oriental and Antiquarian Bookseller, a statement which was confirmed by the presence, dimly to be observed behind a window almost opaque with dirt, of a few fly-blown copies of ancient books.

Although Bill could scarcely have described what he had expected to find, this dingy house, with its rusty railings, its leprous front, its discoloured woodwork and its littered area, was a disappointment. Its aspect was neither exciting nor dangerous, but merely down-at-heel.

What next? Bill strolled on, pondering the problem. He had made no plans, confidently relying on the inspiration of the moment; but he had seldom felt less inspired. Still, he must do something. He turned about to pass the unpromising front once more. And this time a new feature in that fly-walk of a window caught his eye. Over the top of a large volume had appeared a pair of benevolent, bespectacled eyes, and below it the ragged ends of a long white beard. Someone—probably Mr. Solomon Park—was observing him.

The sight drove him forward, up the worn steps and

through the peeling front door into a shabby little hall, from which, through an open door on his left, he found himself looking into the shop. It was a moderately large and immoderately dusty room. Bill had a first impression of books—of books that stretched in bulging tiers from floor to ceiling, that covered every available inch of table room, that thronged the wide mantelpiece, that spilt themselves in untidy heaps about the floor or piled themselves in pyramids upon the rickety chairs. In the centre of this litter, like some weird old animal in his lair, was the little old man who had peeped at him from the window, and who now shuffled forward, with eyes blinking behind big horn spectacles, to inquire his business.

Bill had a sudden impulse to laughter. Could this oddity, with rheumy eyes and shaking hands, in clothes as shabby and stained as the old brown bindings of his tomes, be the fierce fellow who was disturbing the peace of Stavrock? It was impossible.

Bill cleared his throat and bade the old man "Good-morning."

"Good-morning, sir," piped Mr. Park. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Bill paused and then plunged. "I want Mr. Felix Wrench," he said, and watched the old man closely.

"Mr.——? I beg your pardon, sir; I did not quite catch the name." Not a hair had turned.

"Felix Wrench."

"Mr. Felix Wrench?" repeated the old man slowly, and shook his head. "No, sir, there's no one of that name here. Indeed, I can't say that I ever heard it before; not that I can remember. Felix Wrench, Felix Wrench," he murmured, as though to himself. "Are you sure that was the name, sir? And that this was the address?"

"Absolutely. Mr. Felix Wrench, 33, Stewart Square Perhaps upstairs——"

The old man again shook his head. "I am the only occupant of the house," he quavered. "I live

upstairs. I find it a great convenience to be so near my place of business."

"Oh, quite," agreed Bill, rather at a loss. What did one do next? He had a swift, shattering certainty of the futility of his visit. He was hunting a mare's nest. Mary had given him the wrong address. Or Bukholin had misled her. All that remained was to hurry back to Stavrock with the news. As he turned to leave, however, he shot off the last arrow in his quiver.

"Some mistake, I expect," he said. "It doesn't matter. I had a letter to deliver to Mr. Wrench—that's all."

Mr. Park remained as bland, as benevolent, as unperturbed as before. "Mr. Felix Wrench," he mumbled in maddening reiteration, shuffling towards the door to show his visitor out. "Felix Wrench. No, I can't say I recall the name, though I fear my memory is not what it was." Then, as he reached the door, he suddenly inquired: "You're not interested in old books, by any chance, are you, sir?"

"Oh—er—yes," said Bill, crestfallen but polite. "That is, I don't know much about 'em, of course. Jolly lot you've got here."

"I believe I may say that I have. Yes, I really believe I may. Indeed, in my own line, you might go far to find a better collection." He paused, his hand on the door, absorbed in the consideration of his hobby.

"Really? What is your line?" Bill glanced at his watch. He would have plenty of time to pick up his luggage and catch the 12.46 from Paddington.

"Editions of some of the early presses, sir. I've some fine examples of the early German and French presses. I've got something here—if I can lay my hand on it—you might be interested to see, sir." He shambled back to the centre of the room, where he hovered in some uncertainty. He had so much the look of a child, begging to be allowed to show a grown-

up his toys, that Bill had not the heart to disappoint him.

"Yes, I should—very much," he replied, "if it isn't giving you a lot of trouble."

"No trouble, sir, I assure you," said the old man eagerly. "None at all. Now let me see——"

Mr. Park vanished behind a mound of books, to reappear with a flimsy step-ladder in his arms.

"It's a Nicolas Jenson," he said in a cunning whisper, "a real Nicolas Jenson. Something to make your mouth water."

He planted the ladder against a tall shelf. "Must be careful," he explained slyly. "Keep it out of reach of prying hands, sir."

"Can't I get it down for you?" inquired Bill.

"No, no, no," said the old man. "No trouble at all, sir. A pleasure."

Up he climbed with surprising speed, the ladder creaking ominously beneath his weight; up and up till he was perched close to the ceiling.

"A Nicolas Jenson!" The words floated down from the dust and gloom of the upper regions. "A real——"

Crack!

"Look out," cried Bill, but his warning was belated.

One of the steps of the ladder had given; Mr. Park, his foothold lost, clutched at the shelves, his fingers slipping from them as though they were greased; and ladder and bookseller, poised for one desperate moment, fell with a resounding crash to the ground. Books toppled over in all directions, and a cloud of dust rose, so thick as to set Bill coughing and choking.

Then he sprang forward. "I say, are you hurt?" he demanded in some concern.

The little man lay on the floor, entangled in the wreckage of his ladder. His eyes were closed and he gave a faint groan.

Bill removed portions of the ladder and knelt down beside him. The old man had fainted.

"O Lord!" murmured Bill. "Here's a business."

There was no visible damage, but old bones, Bill told himself, were notoriously brittle, and as likely as not something was broken. He must get a doctor; and, as the thought came to him, he recalled having noticed, when he had walked up the square scrutinising the numbers of the houses, a brass plate a few doors down. He had removed his hat when he had knelt to extricate the old man, and now, without pausing to replace it he sped out on to the pavement.

He was only just in time. A car was outside the door he had observed, and the doctor himself, a fussy, impatient little man, was descending his front steps as Bill ran up.

"What's that?" he replied to Bill's breathless story. "Accident? At Number 33? That's the old bookseller, what? All right, all right, I'll come along. Wait a bit. We'll ring up an ambulance first. Fellow will have to be moved to hospital."

Back in Number 33, they found Mr. Park still barely conscious; and after a brief examination the doctor grunted an opinion that the old man had broken a leg.

"Have it properly looked at in hospital," he added. "What's that? The ambulance? Quick work. Open that door."

As the ambulance men entered with a stretcher, the doctor fixed Bill with his eye.

"Likely to be a long job. A month. Perhaps longer. You'll have to carry on without him."

"But——" began Bill, realising that his hatless arrival and dusty clothes had evidently given the doctor a wrong impression.

"Got a latchkey?" demanded the doctor.

"No," said Bill, "but——"

"All right, all right," interrupted the doctor impatiently, and made a dive for Mr. Park's pocket as the stretcher went past. "Here you are; it'll be one of these." He thrust a bunch of keys into Bill's reluctant hand. "Take them, boy, take them."

"But look here——" began Bill.

"Tch, tch," snapped the doctor. "Don't start arguing and asking questions. I've got a patient waiting for me. Late already."

"Doctor!" cried Bill desperately. But the little man was bounding down the steps, and Mr. Park was vanishing head-foremost into the ambulance.

"Taking him to St. Luke's," called the doctor, and was off at a run to his car. He took a flying leap into it, and the chauffeur, well versed in his master's ways, had it under way almost before he was in his seat. At the same moment the ambulance, clanging an impatient warning, shot off in the opposite direction.

Bill was left, standing in the doorway of Mr. Park's shop, keys in hand and mouth full of unspoken protests.

"Well, I'm damned!" was what he actually remarked to the empty square.

(3)

Not much of a compliment, reflected Bill, to be mistaken—even by a doctor in a hurry—as assistant in Mr. Park's one-horse establishment; nor much of a joke to be planted with a house full of junk and told, quite casually, to keep the home fires burning for a month or so, until Mr. Park returned to business. In fact, it was pretty thick. Bill had just decided to write "Nothing doing" on a slip of paper and drop it and the keys down the doctor's letter-box, when he jumped a clear two inches in the air as the trill of a bell cut through the silence of the empty house.

"Telephone!" he gasped. "Who'd have thought it!" The bell had rung twice more before he discovered the instrument; it was in a dark little back room, and he could just reach it between a narrow alley formed by walls of stacked books. He took off the receiver.

"Hullo."

"Is that Museum 9988?"

"Yes." Bill supposed that probably it was.

"Park!" The voice was very distinct and authoritative. "B. is coming from Holland this morning. We are meeting at your place this evening at nine to receive a report on the Plinn business. Have the room ready."

The receiver nearly dropped from Bill's hand. In the upset of Mr. Park, his mission had passed from his mind so completely that these few words were like a douche of cold water. The Plinn business! And B.—that must be Bukholin—was on his way over. So it was not a mare's nest, and that little old rascal with a smashed leg was not such an innocent as he had appeared. But this was gorgeous. Here he was——

"What? Don't you hear me?" said the voice sharply.

"I—er—oh yes, I hear you," stammered Bill, incoherent with excitement.

"Eh? That's not—is that Mr. Solomon Park speaking?"

Bill did some quick thinking. "No," he answered, pulling himself together. "Mr. Park has had an accident."

"An accident?"

"Yes. Fell from a ladder and broke his leg. They've taken him to hospital."

Bill heard a soft "Damnation!" from the other end. Then: "Who are you?"

"Cam—er—Collins," said Bill desperately. "Godfrey Collins," he added with more confidence, selecting his names at random. "I'm Mr. Park's assistant."

"I didn't know he had one." The voice was openly suspicious.

"Oh yes," said Bill glibly. "I've not been here long. Mr. Park was beginning to find the work a little too much for him."

"Hm!" The owner of the voice was evidently thinking out this complication. "Well, look here,

Mr.—er—Mr. Collins, there's to be a board meeting at Number 33 this evening, the board of a company in which Mr. Park is interested."

"Very good, sir," said Bill, warming to his work. "Will you require me to be present?"

"Certainly not. You will leave at your usual time —what is that?"

"Er—six o'clock."

"You will leave at six o'clock. I have a latchkey and will admit the—er—the gentlemen who are attending the meeting. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And—er—Collins, you may not be aware that Mr. Park greatly dislikes any gossip about his business affairs. You will therefore be careful not to discuss them with anybody. Mr. Park would be highly displeased if he found there had been idle talk about —well, about this meeting, for instance."

"Very good, sir," said Bill respectfully. "You may rely on me not to say a word to anyone, sir."

"Thank you. That's all."

Mr. Park's assistant hung up the receiver and danced an unprofessional little *pas seul* among Mr. Park's books.

"Oh, Jimmy," he apostrophised his absent brother, "why aren't you here too?"

CHAPTER VII

BILL MINDS THE SHOP

(1)

"THIS," said Bill, seating himself on the most stable and least dusty of Mr. Park's chairs, "calls for serious thought." To begin with, the unknown gentleman with whom he had been chatting on the telephone completely bore out Mary's story. At any rate, a Mr. B. was at the moment on his way from Holland for a pow-wow with his friends at 33, Stewart Square, the address which Bukholin had given in his letter; and that this was not merely an astonishing coincidence was proved by the fact that the first item on the agenda at the Board Meeting was "the Plinn business."

Secondly, it must regretfully be conceded that Mr. Park, with his bookish patter, horn spectacles and benevolent air, was in the plot. On the mention of a letter he had said nothing, but had tried to detain Bill on the pretext of showing him a book. But for the accident, his treacherous memory would shortly have recalled a Mr. Felix Wrench who *might* be expecting a message.

Thirdly, first the doctor, and next, apparently, the telephone gentleman, were quite ready to accept Bill as Mr. Park's assistant, a mistake which Mr. Park was unlikely for awhile to be in a position to correct.

Fourthly, somehow or other, Bill must contrive to listen in at the "Board Meeting" that evening and discover what he could of Mr. B.'s designs. This last point was the most important. But where was this meeting to be held? Not, surely, in Mr. Park's

book-cluttered shop; nor in the little back room. A journey of exploration was indicated.

Bill went up an uncarpeted stair to the first landing and tried the door. It was locked, but he soon found the right key on the bunch the doctor had thrust into his hand. He found himself on the threshold of what, in happier days, must have been the drawing-room, for it ran the width of the house and overlooked the square, immediately above the shop. It was sparely but comfortably furnished. In the centre was a long oak table, at which were set some eight chairs upholstered in leather. A couple of armchairs were drawn up expectantly in front of the empty grate, and in one of the windows was a closed roll-top desk. Obviously this was the Board-room; equally obviously it offered no shelter to an eavesdropper; but Bill's eye, travelling over its commonplace furnishings, was caught and held by a big double door which presumably led into a back room. He stepped across to examine it. The door was, in fact, a partition, divided in the centre, and so designed that on festive occasions the two flaps might slide apart and throw the two rooms into one; designed, too, reflected Bill, so that if the two flaps did not quite meet, anyone in the back room would be able to overhear everything that was said in the front room. He forced the flaps a quarter of an inch apart and went round to investigate. He found himself in the counterpart of the little room downstairs, and, from the piles of loose books that lay about, Mr. Park's overflow store. Bill cleared a niche close to the double doors, walling it in with books so that anyone casually looking into the room would not see him at his listening-post. Then he returned to the landing.

So far so good, but while he was about it, he might as well explore the rest of the premises. Mr. Park had said he was alone in the house, but there were indications that Mr. Park was not a very truthful old man. It would be advisable to establish the fact.

The floor above was uninteresting. There was a frowsy bedroom, with cheap furniture, an unmade bed and meagre washing arrangements. The other room on the same floor was apparently Mr. Park's kitchen-parlour. There was a small gas cooker, and a few pots and pans and dirty plates lay about; a couple of wooden chairs stood beside a bare deal table; a low wicker chair, whose cushions were dark with dirt and grease, and a laden bookshelf completed the furniture. Plain living and high thinking was certainly Mr. Park's rule. Bill snuffed the stale air of the room disgustfully and returned to the ground floor.

The basement remained. He groped his way down a flight of steps, to bump into something solid at the bottom. A lighted match revealed a locked door, steel by the feel of it, and so heavy that nothing less than a stick of dynamite could have forced it open. Bill, however, had something better even than dynamite: he had Mr. Park's keys, and, after one or two attempts, he felt the give of the lock and the smooth inward swing of the door. Another match disclosed what appeared to be a lumber room; also, close to the door, a gas jet to which Bill set another match. As the light flared up, he could see that the room was filled with oddments, bric-à-brac, stray pieces of furniture, junk of every sort. It might have been a dump such as may be found in an attic or a cellar of most houses, a collection of articles past use, which the owner is too lazy or too sentimental to throw away. But, looking closer, Bill had his doubts. There were several oil paintings, ripped from their frames; and even to Bill's inexpert eye they were good paintings. There was a cabinet inlaid with tortoise-shell which would have adorned any drawing-room. In a corner there was a great heap of tarnished candlesticks, spoons and forks, and, bending over them, Bill could trace beneath the tarnish the faint lines of crests. There were two fine mantelpieces which Grinling Gibbons

might have carved, and which must have been cut bodily from a wall. There was a little china, and it was good china. And there was a lot more stuff of the kind. Very odd! Mr. Park evidently dealt in other articles besides ancient and Oriental books.

Bill next turned his attention to a large safe that stood against the wall, and with the aid of the keys swung open the heavy door. Inside were quantities of leather cases in a disorderly pile. Bill took one at random and opened it, and the light fell upon a necklace of pearls, soft, gleaming and with that queer lustre which only real or the best imitation pearls will show. And even the best imitation pearls would hardly be kept in such a stronghold. Bill opened one or two more cases. He found a buckle, set with diamonds, a lovely little watch in gold and enamel, a ring alight with rubies.

And then the truth smote Bill like a thunderclap. Mr. Park's proper business was not the selling of books; his mounds of dusty volumes were little more than an elaborate blind. He was a "fence," a receiver of stolen goods, and this was his treasure-trove.

Bill closed the safe, turned out the gas, carefully locked the steel door, and returned to the shop to discover that he was feeling uncommonly hungry. It was two o'clock and he had breakfasted at half-past eight. "We'll shut up shop," he murmured to himself, "and get some lunch. Somehow I fancy a little food before the sort of fun there's going to be in the old square to-night."

(2)

Three o'clock had just struck when Bill let himself into Number 33 once more. He set to work to clear away the *débris* of the ladder and lit a cigarette to help his mental processes. He had scarcely taken half-a-dozen puffs when he heard a shuffle of feet on the steps outside, followed by the jar of the front door and a tread

in the passage. A moment later an old gentleman with white hair put his head into the shop and cleared his throat. Bill watched him warily. The man looked harmless enough, but after his encounter with Mr. Park, Bill was suspecting everybody. The man might be a genuine customer, or he might not.

"Good-afternoon, sir," said Bill politely, coming forward.

"G'r-afternoon," growled the old gentleman. "Are you Mr. Park?"

"No, sir. Mr. Park has unfortunately had an accident. I am his assistant."

"Oh, you are!" said the old gentleman severely, his eye settling in a glare on Bill's lighted cigarette. "And so you take advantage of your master's misfortune to smoke in his absence!"

Bill blushed guiltily, mumbled an apology and flung his half-smoked cigarette into the empty grate.

"Don't do that!" shrieked the old man. "Bless my soul, you'll set the place on fire. Put it out, boy, put it out."

Bill meekly retrieved his stub and ground its glowing end beneath his heel, before returning it to the grate. Meanwhile the old man muttered to himself about the danger of burning valuable books and the carelessness of the rising generation of shop assistants.

When Bill faced him once more, he came to his business. "Mr. Park wrote to me," he said, "that he had acquired a first edition of the *Hypnerotomachia*."

"The how much?" inquired Bill.

"Are you deaf?" barked the old man, "or a fool? I said the *Hypnerotomachia*."

"Oh—er—yes, of course, sir," Bill hastened to say. "Now you mention it I remember that Mr. Park has —or, rather, I should say he had—a copy of—er—that book."

"Had? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like this, sir. We certainly *had* one, but only yesterday a gentleman—an American gentleman"

—this, Bill felt, was brilliant improvisation—" came in and saw it, and——"

" You don't mean to say you sold that book to some —some infernal American? "

" Not I, sir," Bill hurriedly explained. " Mr. Park did. The gentleman was most insistent. He bought it on the spot and went off with it under his arm."

" Went off with it! " the old man exploded. " Went off with my *Hypnerotomachia!* It's an outrage. Mr. Park wrote that he would keep it for me to inspect, and I've come all the way from Birmingham to see it."

" Oh dear," said Bill sympathetically. " That *is* hard lines, isn't it? "

" It's disgraceful," fumed the old man. " I've been brought here under false pretences. I'm not sure it isn't actionable."

" Is there any other book you'd like instead? " suggested Bill in his most soothing voice.

" Any other book! Do you suppose I've come all the way from Birmingham to buy rubbish? Certainly not, young man. And let me tell you that if I wanted to do Mr. Park a good turn—which I emphatically don't—I should inform him that his assistant was an idle, careless, ignorant and incompetent fellow, who knows nothing about his work and looks more like a puppy from the University than a bookseller. That's what I should tell him."

With this thrust, the old man, still muttering imprecations, stumped out of the shop.

" He sounds quite upset," remarked Bill, as through the window he watched an indignant back pass down the steps. " There's one customer who'll never darken these doors again. Serves old Solomon right."

But the encounter gave him an idea. He must really play—and look—his part better. The old man had scored a bull's-eye with his " University puppy," and Bill, surveying his well-cut blue serge suit, had to own it out of keeping with his job and his surroundings. Of course, he might close the shop and

lock the front door, but if he did, and the fellow who had spoken to him on the telephone were to turn up earlier than he was expected, he might be suspicious at the premature departure of the assistant. Besides—the other way was more fun.

Bill took off his coat, ruffled his hair, shook some of Mr. Park's dust over his waistcoat and trousers, and stuck a pen behind his ear. Then, feeling more plausible, he sat down before an open account book.

Presently another customer actually arrived—an elderly lady, not wanting any particular book, but merely to browse around; and before she left, Bill actually sold her for the large sum of half-a-crown (arbitrarily fixed) a volume which neither had heard of before. (Bill gravely assured her that everybody was buying it, and she replied that she had been meaning to read it for a long while, but had so little time, what with one thing and another.)

"Thank you, madam," Bill had said when the purchase was completed. "Is there anything else I can show you? Very well, madam. Good-day." That was more like it.

A quarter of an hour must have slipped by after the lady's departure when Bill, happening to glance out of the window, had his twentieth surprise of the day. For there, standing on the pavement and staring up at the house, was his young brother Jim.

Bill rushed to the window and, flattening his face on the pane, perpetrated the most extravagant grimace in the capacity of his countenance. He was rewarded by the spectacle of Jim's dropped jaw and popping eyes. There was a rush up the front steps, and a moment later Jim was in the shop with him.

"Bill!" was his amazed comment at his brother's appearance. "I say, what on earth are you doing?"

"Selling books," was Bill's reply.

"But, Bill——"

"Collins, if you please—Godfrey Collins. I always fancied Godfrey as a name. It's so pure."

"Godfrey Collins?" stammered his brother.

"Certainly. And let me tell you, my lad, that business is fairly buzzing this afternoon. I've had a bust-up with a bloke who had come all the way from Birmingham after some bawdy book. And I've just taken half-a-crown off someone's old auntie."

"But, Bill——" gasped Jim again.

"Antiquarian and Oriental Bookseller—that's me," continued Bill mercilessly. "Not much in your line, my boy. No Edgar Wallace. No P. G. Wodehouse. Highbrow stuff." And he tapped his forehead.

"Do stop ragging," pleaded his bewildered brother.

"All right. And if we're getting down to brass tacks, what the blazes are you doing here?"

"Bill, it's Mary. She's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"Disappeared."

This time it was Bill's jaw that dropped. "Come on. Spit out the whole story."

"After she left you at Chippenham, she was going on to Bath to see her dentist. I had arranged to meet the 6.10 at Stavrock Halt and run her home in the Morris."

"I know. Well?"

"I met the 6.10, and she wasn't on it. I met the 7.8 and the 8.40, and she wasn't on either. Then we telephoned to Chippenham, but they hadn't seen her at the station. By that time we were sweating blood. Mother insisted on getting in the police, though I wasn't sure that we ought."

"Of course you ought."

"Anyhow, she rang up the Bath constabulary. By that time it was ten o'clock at night and they couldn't do much except make inquiries at the dentist's. Mother was in a frightful state. She rang 'em up again this morning, and went off to Bath by the early train."

"What did the police say?"

"Not much. They found Mary had left the dentist's at a quarter to four, and that was the last anyone saw of her."

"Oh Lord!" groaned Bill, tugging at his hair in

dismay. "Jimmy, we were a pair of idiots to let her go off by herself like that. I might have known this would happen."

"So I thought," continued Jim, "I'd better shoot off to London and tell you. I got to Aunt Aggie's an hour ago. She had no idea where you were; said you used her house as a hotel, and she only expected to see you at breakfast, and not always then. So I blew along here as the most likely address at which to find you. You'll come back, of course."

"Not I. Look here, it's a bad war, Jimmy, but it might be worse. Listen to me now." He told his adventures, Jim registering the correct emotions of surprise, sensation and thrill.

"So you see," Bill concluded, "with any luck I shall hear the whole damn story to-night—where they've got Mary and what they propose to do with her."

"I say," exclaimed Jim, his eyes dancing with excitement, "I'm in on this too, aren't I?"

Bill pondered the suggestion. "I think not, old boy," he said at last, "though I'd give something for your company. One pair of ears is as good as a dozen, and we mustn't put all our eggs in one basket. You must be outside and able to do something if the plan goes wrong."

"You mean if these chaps find you?"

"Yes. It's not likely, but there's a chance. You must go back to Aunt Aggie's and take my bed for the night. Then if I'm not back bright and early to-morrow morning, get the police on to this house at once. See?"

"Yes," said Jim, "though I'm blowed if I know what I'm to tell Aunt Aggie."

"Any old story. Say I'm making a night of it with some friends I ran across—dinner, theatre and so forth—and am dossing down with them so as not to disturb her precious household by coming in with the milk."

"Oh, all right," agreed Jim. "Don't think much of my job, all the same."

"Never mind. You'll have your fun to-morrow when we start chasing Mary."

Jim cheered up a little at that thought.

"In fact," Bill told him, "if it weren't for Mary, this would be the biggest blooming rag we've ever had. Jimmy, it's five o'clock. Time you cleared."

"All right. Here's luck, Bill."

"Thanks. Good-night, old boy."

(3)

Scarcely had Jim disappeared down the square than the front door again opened. Footsteps shuffled in the little hall; and through the inner door a rusty black hat appeared, followed by the upper part of a middle-aged and slightly dilapidated female. The lady at her first glance missed Bill, who thereupon bade her "Good-evening."

"Lor'!" she exclaimed, "'ow you did startle me! Ow, and it's not Mr. Park!"

"Mr. Park's had an accident and been taken to hospital with a broken leg," explained Bill. "I'm looking after the place in his absence."

The mournful news had a stimulating effect on the lady.

"Well, I never!" she cried. "You don't say so! Broke 'is leg, 'as he? Pore old gentleman! And to think that only yesterday evenin' 'e was sittin' in 'ere as cheerful-like as you or I. 'Good-evenin', Mrs. 'Ackitt'—that's me—'e says. 'Good-evenin', Mr. Park,' says I. 'Come to do your bit o' cleanin'?' says 'e. 'That's right,' says I. And so now 'e's in 'orspital! Well, well. And 'ow did the tragedy 'appen, sir, may I arsk?"

"He was getting down a book and the steps collapsed."

"And 'ow often 'ave I told him," inquired Mrs. Hackitt, "that at 'is time o' life 'e didn't oughter go runnin' up an' down them steps? But did 'e listen to me? Not 'im. Obstinate 'e was." She shook her head solemnly and with plain enjoyment. "And so you're lookin' arter the books, are you?" she went on. "Mr.—Mr.——?"

"Collins."

"Indeed. Funny Mr. Park didn't never mention your name to me, though 'e always was a gentleman to keep 'imself to 'imself, as the sayin' is. You've not bin 'ere long, sir, beggin' your pardon?"

"Only since this morning," said Bill. "I—I happened to be looking for a job and was round here when the accident happened."

"Well, if that wasn't a bit o' luck! And now I shall 'ave to get on with my cleanin'!"

"You must tell me if I'm in your way," said Bill, outwardly polite, but inwardly cursing this complication.

"Lor' bless you, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Hackitt, snatching at the chance of prolonging the conversation, "you ain't in m' way. Why, it 'ud cost me m' job to lay so much as a finger on this room—or on Mr. Park's rooms upstairs, for the matter o' that. Not that they couldn't do with a bit o' dustin', but folks 'as their own idees. 'Look arter the Board-room,' says Mr. Park, 'and the stairs and the 'all, and don't you get worryin' about the rest o' the 'ouse.'"

"Indeed," said Bill discouragingly.

"That's right. And now you mustn't keep me standin' 'ere talkin'," said Mrs. Hackitt, gathering up a shapeless bag which she was carrying. "I've got m' work to do, same as anyone, and soonest begun soonest done, as the sayin' is."

She shambled from the room, and presently noises overhead betokened the progress of her "bit o' cleanin'." That this amounted to little more than the proverbial lick and promise was indicated by the brevity of her

stay. At a quarter to six she was down again demanding further details of the morning's tragedy.

"So they took 'im off in a ambulance," she murmured. "It gives me quite a turn to think about it."

She dithered for the better part of ten minutes before finally departing.

"Well, I s'pose I'll be seein' you to-morrow," were her last words.

"I suppose so," replied Bill cautiously, supposing nothing of the kind. "Good-night, Mrs. Hackitt."

(4)

The house was very silent after the char-lady's departure, so silent that the occasional rattle of a taxi or a van outside was quite reassuring. The sun had dipped behind the houses opposite, and the drooping trees and sooty grass of the square garden were deep in shadow when, on the stroke of six, Bill pulled down the blinds and slipped the latch of the front door.

Since he had no idea when the gentleman with the latchkey would arrive, he must for safety spend the hours between six and nine in his listening-post. It was too dark to read, so he sat on the chair he had set in that niche among the books in the first floor back room, munched some sandwiches he had bought when he went out for lunch, and listened.

Waiting is always difficult: even Bill, who had sound nerves, found it jumpy work. An empty house plays queer tricks, particularly when the light is failing and you are listening for something. Again and again Bill would tauten to some noise, to conclude after a minute or so of tense expectation that it had only been a fall of soot in a chimney or the cracking of old woodwork or the scurry of a rat.

When, a little after half-past eight, the front door was opened, the sound was unmistakable, and Bill heaved a sigh of relief that the worst of the wait was over.

The worst of the wait, but not of the risk. The meeting was to be at nine, and if in the intervening half-hour the man were to pry about the house, Bill's hiding-place might well be disclosed.

Footsteps mounted the stairs and crossed the landing. The door of the Board-room opened; there was the spurt of a match, followed by a light that waxed stronger and stronger as jet after jet of gas was lit. The crack in the partition was now a long, yellow streak, momentarily shadowed as the man passed in his wanderings about the room. Bill could hear the pad of his footsteps on the carpet, but could see nothing. There was the click of a turning key and a rumble that was evidently the top of the roll-top desk being pushed back; then the scrape of a chair; and then silence. The man was writing.

At five minutes to nine the front-door bell rang, jangling noisily through the house. The man went down to open it. It rang again and again, at short intervals, four or five times in all; footsteps passed up the stairs in a steady procession, and a murmur of voices arose in the adjoining room. Bill leaned forward to listen.

"Who are coming?" asked a voice.

Someone reeled off a few names which Bill tried to memorise.

"And Bukholin?"

"He will be here at nine."

"What is the business?"

A louder tramp of footsteps on the stairs. Voices—one voice in particular, soft, purring, but curiously distinct, with a quality in it that made Bill feel as though his hair were being stroked the wrong way. Greetings and introductions. Evidently the "Board" had assembled.

"Are we all here?" purred the particular voice, which must be the "Chairman's."

"Yes."

"Good. Let us begin. Sebenin, we will have your report."

A new voice, guttural and faintly foreign in accent, began to speak.

"I have excellent news," it said. "Two days ago Miss Plinn left her house to stay with friends. That night we arranged to enter the Abbey and make a search in her room."

"And you found?"

"Nothing. But listen. Fate worked for us. Yesterday she went to Bath, a town near her home. We marked her down while she was waiting for her train at Chippenham, a smaller town near by. We started off by road, reaching Bath a little before she arrived. It had been raining that morning, and it seemed likely to rain again. Carson borrowed a taxi-cab at the station. He gave the chauffeur two pounds and told him he had a bet. They are sportsmen in Bath. Then he followed Miss Plinn to a house in the town. She entered: he waited outside. The rain began again, and when she came out, there was a taxi-cab, close to the pavement, nice and convenient—what do you say?—handy." The voice laughed. In she gets, telling Carson to drive to the station. At the bottom of the street I was waiting, to stop the taxi-cab, so wet, so anxious to catch my train, so much apologising. And she—of course she graciously consented to take me in. After that it was easy."

"You did well," commended the "Chairman," "very well."

"'Alf a moment," broke in a new voice, undoubtedly English and Cockney. "'*Alf* a moment, *if* you please. Now, look 'ere, Comrade, wot's it all abaht? That's wot I wanter know. Wot's the gime? Chasin' a bit of a girl. I'm a Red orl right; ev'ryone knows Bill 'Argreaves isn't be'indhand w'en there's a capitalist to be dahned and wot not. But this 'ere don't seem on the level, strite it don't. Let's 'ave a little light on the bloomin' sitooation, *if* you please."

Two or three other voices began to babble, but were hushed by the "Chairman."

"The young woman," he said quietly, "is in

possession of something which it is important for our people to obtain."

"Wot's that?"

"That is not your business. She has been given every opportunity to surrender it, and she has not done so. We must now try—other methods."

"Yes, we've 'eard 'ow she's bin pinched. And wot next? Wot if she tells yer ter go ter blazes?"

"That again is my affair. Comrade Hargreaves does not appear to realise that it is for him to obey orders, not to ask questions." A little chorus of assent indicated that Comrade Hargreaves was in a minority of one on the Board.

"You have a saying in this country, I believe," continued the "Chairman," "that he who pays the piper calls the tune."

"That's orl my eye," grumbled Mr. Hargreaves. "It's easy come and easy go with you chaps. As like as not you'll be aht o' the bloomin' country in a week, and *we'll* 'ave to clear up the mess. An' if you think you can go abaht pinchin' young wimmen in Bath, and no questions arsked, you're bloody well mistook."

"Comrade Hargreaves is afraid?" There was a nasty inflexion in the purr.

A fist came thumping down on the table. "Afraid!" shouted Mr. Hargreaves. "If you come outside I'll soon show you if I'm afraid."

("I like this Hargreaves," said Bill to himself. "Quite a sportsman.")

Voices were raised in expostulation, in agreement, in the pacifying of the minority.

"Oh, you can tork," said the irate Hargreaves; "tork the 'ind leg off of a donkey, you can. But I've 'ad enough. A fair scrap's one thing, and chivvyin' a gel abaht's another. You can count me out, Comrades."

"I don't think we can quite do that," replied the "Chairman." "For all we can tell, you might pay a visit to these police for whom you appear to have so wholesome a respect."

"What! Me let on to the police!"

"Besides—there is the little matter of discipline. For the last time, Comrade, are you with us in this affair?"

"You can go to 'ell," said Hargreaves stoutly, "you an' your discipline. You've 'eard me. Good-night all."

There was a sharp ejaculation, a scuffle, a faint thud as of a muffled blow, a fall, a choking gasp. "Ah-h, you swine . . . you dirty swine . . ." The cry ended in a groan. Bill was on his feet. But it was too late. He could do nothing. He sat down again. He was trembling and felt deadly sick. Until then the business had been half serious, and half "the biggest blooming rag" of his life. But now . . .

"You'll have to arrange to dispose of that," dimly he heard the "Chairman" say in a matter-of-fact voice. "Slip a newspaper under him, so as to leave no trace on the carpet. You were saying, Sebenin?"

The other man resumed in a whisper, as though subdued by that twisted shape on the carpet, which Bill, without seeing, knew must be there. It was hard enough to hear, when his heart was pounding like a steam hammer, and the blood was throbbing in his temples, and a hot rage was boiling up inside him. Murderous devils! But he must listen: that was vital. ". . . took her . . ." he heard. And "Where is that?" from the "Chairman."

Bill shifted a little so as to bring his ear closer to that line of light.

Crash! In moving he had dislodged one of Mr. Park's tomes, sent it toppling to the ground with a noise to wake the dead. For the fraction of a second Bill held his breath aghast. "The stair. Quickly!" he heard someone say, and he, too, dived frantically for the door on to the landing. In the darkness he plunged through that jungle of books, scattering them before him like skittles; tripped and fell, was up again, and gripped the door-handle. But a book had wedged

itself under the door, jamming it, and another precious moment was lost in wrenching it open.

On the landing he faced two men with levelled revolvers.

"Oh, all right," he said lamely; "have it your own way."

"Bring him in," the "Chairman's" voice commanded, and Bill was hustled into the gas-lit Boardroom. Blinking at the glare, he looked about him. Not a yard away was the crumpled body of Bill Hargreaves, face downwards on the heavy carpet, with an ugly stain in the small of his back. Bill shuddered, struggling with nausea once more, and a new, swift dread. Then he saw the table and the four men who sat at it; and at once his eyes were held fascinated by the man who sat at the end—clean-shaven, pallid, but with a spot of colour on either cheek, a little, cruel red mouth, eyes that were as cold as a snake's under eyebrows like black smears on the dead white of his forehead. The other men scarcely existed: this man—the "Chairman"—Bukholin—alone counted.

"Who is this?" the man asked; and the ghost of a certain Hindu merchant might have warned Bill that his own discovery had been hailed with these very words by that very man; and on that occasion one Ogdai Khan, an Uzbeg, had been waiting conveniently outside.

"I think," replied one of the men who had met Bill on the landing, "that this must be Park's new assistant, his much too curious assistant. His name is Godfrey Collins."

"I doubt it," put in one of the men at the table, who had turned his chair round and was staring at Bill. He was a tall fellow, with a pointed black beard and a face that was vaguely familiar. "I doubt it," he repeated. "This is Mr. William Campion of Havilden, close to Stavrock Abbey."

"You've got it in one," said Bill with as much jauntiness as he could muster. "The bell rings and

your penny is returned to you." Now where had he seen that fellow? And then he remembered: it was the artist—Constantine—who had taken the Priory Farm.

"And to what do we owe the pleasure of Mr. Campion's presence?" inquired Bukholin softly.

"You know perfectly well," retorted Bill. "What have you done with Miss Plinn?"

"Does that concern you?"

"Certainly."

Bukholin stroked his chin. "So you are concerned with Miss Plinn?" he said thoughtfully. "That is interesting. I wonder whether Miss Plinn is concerned with you."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"You shall see, my friend. I think you have timed your visit most conveniently—for me. There is somewhere to put him?"

"Upstairs," replied one of the men. "We can tie him up and gag him and leave him there."

Constantine looked doubtful. "Would it not be safer——?" he ventured thoughtfully.

Bukholin gave a soft, low laugh. "No," he replied, "it would not. You will be careful with Mr. William Campion of Havilden, Louis. He is a young man with prospects."

"What are you going to do with me?" demanded Bill. "Stick a knife into me as you did to that—that poor devil there?"

"He asked too many questions," replied Bukholin. "I hope, Mr. Campion, you will not fall into the same error. Take him away, Louis."

CHAPTER VIII

A BABE IN BLOOMSBURY

(1)

P.C. PEAKE let out his belt an extra hole in order to provide further accommodation for the hearty breakfast he had recently consumed, laid aside his copy of the *Daily Sketch*, and heaved a deep sigh. He knew of more desirable spots on a fine morning in June than the Police Station in Revel Street, Bloomsbury. He could think of many more profitable occupations than to sit on a wooden chair for four hours and wait for something to happen. There was, for example, Beer, which, if a little less than a profession, is surely a little more than an occupation. P.C. Peake was a man of simple tastes, and Beer stood for much in his life. It irked him at the moment to recall that the next interesting event in the day could not possibly take place till a few minutes after twelve o'clock, when he would come off duty. Three bleak, cheerless, beerless hours must pass before he won that happy release. It was not as though anything were in the least likely to happen during that period. Nothing ever did happen in Bloomsbury between nine and twelve in the morning; nothing, that is, that could conceivably lead to the promotion of a deserving police constable. Promotion, of course, was P.C. Peake's other deity; promotion, properly regarded, being merely access to further and ampler supplies of liquid refreshment—as it were an extra turn to that sacred and all-satisfying tap; and promotion—there was no denying it—was slow.

He sighed again and, raising his eyes from the con-

templation of the square black toes of his serviceable boots, observed that a slim youth of pleasing and open countenance was standing irresolutely in the doorway.

Now five years in the Metropolitan Police Force had taught P.C. Peake many things: to distinguish, for instance, between a man who is drunk in a police court sense and a man who is merely temporarily exhilarated; to estimate, again, exactly how much he might say and to what magistrate he might safely say it. But above all, as he himself would have put it, he had learnt to know a gentleman when he saw one. He was, he told himself at once, seeing one now, albeit a very young one; and he rose and comported himself accordingly.

"Good-morning, sir," he said in a tone at once deferential and businesslike. "Is there anything you want?"

"Yes," said the young man. "Could I—could I speak to the officer in charge here?"

P.C. Peake gave a little hitch to his body and smiled a complacent smile. "Well, sir," he said, "at the moment, in a manner of speaking, that's me. The Inspector should be round in 'arf an hour or so, but you tell me what you want, and maybe I can fix you up."

"Oh," said the young gentleman. "It's very good of you. As a matter of fact it's most frightfully urgent. I—well, you see—it's like this. At least——" He stammered, broke off, and blushed.

"Now, sir," said P.C. Peake in his most fatherly manner, "you just sit down here and tell me all about it. Bin getting into any sort of trouble?"

Jim sat down. He had overslept himself, to wake at eight o'clock and realise in one ghastly moment that Bill had not come back to Tranton Gardens; he must have been discovered, was now, perhaps, in danger; and it was up to him, Jim, to do something and to do it quickly. He had tumbled out of bed, flung himself into a bath and bundled on his clothes. Under pressure from Aunt Aggie ("My dear boy, you can't possibly go out on an empty stomach"), he had

swallowed a quick cup of coffee before dashing into the street, when, as luck would have it, he had picked up a cruising taxi almost at once.

"The police station," he had gasped. "As fast as you can."

The driver had regarded him impassively. "Wot police station?"

"Any. The nearest. No, wait. Is there one in Bloomsbury, near Stewart Square?"

The driver had pondered with maddening deliberation before replying, "Revel Street's what you want."

So here he was, and here was this big, good-natured Bobby, with a face like the setting sun, asking him if he had been getting into trouble.

"I? No, at least, it's my brother."

"Oh, it's your brother," said P.C. Peake in an encouraging voice. "I'm sorry to hear that, sir; I've a young brother meself."

Jim was suddenly beset by the stark improbability of his story. How was he to convey it credibly to this large, solid, matter-of-fact police constable? Still, it must be tried.

"I left him last night in a house near here," he began.

"Ah!" said P.C. Peake. "One moment, sir, please." He produced a notebook and moistened the point of a stump of pencil. "Now, sir, let's 'ave your name and address." He took it down. "Where do you say you left your brother?"

"At 33, Stewart Square. He——"

"Gently, sir. Go easy. . . . Stewart Square. Yes?"

"You see, it sounds awfully unlikely, but the fact is he had discovered that a gang of crooks were going to meet there last night."

"A wot?" inquired P.C. Peake, with poised pencil.

"A gang of crooks. And as the owner of the house had gone to hospital, Bill—my brother, that is—was pretending to be his assistant."

Jim noticed that the pencil had abandoned an unequal race. P.C. Peake had closed his notebook and was staring very straightly at Jim, who floundered gallantly on.

"So he meant to hide and overhear what was said."

"Ah," said the constable, "so he meant to 'ide and over'ear wot was said, did 'e? And wot *was* said?"

"That's just it. He's never come out, and I'm afraid they've collared him. Oh, and I forgot to say that Park—the fellow who kept the shop—is really a 'fence,' a receiver of stolen goods, you know."

"Lor'!" said the constable. "You don't say so! But 'aven't you forgotten something? Wot about the young lady in the case?"

"What! Miss Plinn? Yes, but—I say, how did you know that? I didn't want to bring her——" A vast smile was overspreading the constable's face. "You don't believe a word I'm saying," Jim cried indignantly.

P.C. Peake, as has been mentioned, was a man of discernment. He was well aware that what from a young man of the lower orders was "lip" and to be treated as such, was merely a bit of fun from a young gentleman. Besides, he was too good-natured to resent the pulling of his leg.

"Well, wot do you think, sir?" he said. "You didn't ought to come in 'ere with a story like that. Not on a Thursday morning you didn't," he added, as though the day of the week made all the difference. "Crooks and 'fences' and young ladies—I'm surprised you 'aven't said nothing about Bolshies."

"If you want to know," said Jim unwisely, "I believe they *are* Bolshevists."

P.C. Peake slapped his thigh and flung back his head with a hearty laugh.

"Well, if that don't beat the bloomin' band!" he cried. "But it ain't no good, sir, not a bit. I wasn't born yesterday, nor yet the day before. And it's lucky for you it was me you tried it on and not the Inspector"—he lowered his voice cautiously. "The Inspector don't always take a joke in the spirit like it was meant."

"But I'm not joking," protested Jim, who indeed was nearer weeping with despair and exasperation.

"I'm serious: I swear I am. I tell you—— oh, God! what am I to do?"

His distress was so obviously genuine that P.C. Peake began to doubt his first diagnosis. "Well, if it ain't a joke," he said, and had an inspiration. "I'll tell you wot your trouble is, my lad: too much Edgar Wallace. That's wot it is. Crooks and 'fences' and young ladies!"

During this speech Jim was biting his lips to hold his temper in. He told himself that he must keep cool and not blunder about. He had charged bald-headed into a business for which care and diplomacy were needed.

"Look here," he said quietly, "I don't suppose anything I say will convince you. Why not see for yourself? Come along to Stewart Square with me now."

"And wot sort of a fool would I look when we got there?" demanded the constable.

"Just to have a glance at the house," pleaded Jim. "If you're right, there's no harm done; and if I'm right, it would be a terrific score for you."

"Now chuck it," said P.C. Peake. "Wot do you take me for? 'Taint in reason to ask me to go along to Stewart Square on a warm morning with a tale like that. You go 'ome and 'ave a lay down."

Jim played his last trump, without much hope of taking the trick. "All the same," he said persuasively, "I should be tremendously grateful if you *would* come along—just to satisfy me, you know; and afterwards we might find a place where we could have a drink—as it's such a warm morning."

The faintest of gleams appeared in the eye of P.C. Peake. This was talking. It was a pity that a young gentleman who was so plainly a young gentleman should be weak in the top storey. "I don't 'ardly see 'ow that could be, sir," he said; "not without the Inspector giving me the word. If 'e says 'Go,' go I will and gladly, if it's to ease your mind, so to speak. And as you say, sir, it *is* a warm morning and no mistake."

Jim's heart sank at the prospect of having his work to do again with a new man.

"Where is your Inspector?" he asked.

"'E should be in any minnit. When 'e comes, you tell 'im you're troubled-like about your brother, and cut out the bits about Bolshies and 'fences.'"

"Oh, all right," said Jim wearily, subsiding into his chair.

The minutes dragged their intolerable length. Policemen marched in and out, with a clumping of boots and a banging of doors and a brief greeting to their colleague on duty; and at last, at a familiar footfall, P.C. Peake sprang to his feet.

"Good-morning, sir," he said, and the Inspector with a curt acknowledgment passed through into an inner room.

"Now then," whispered the constable to Jim, "we'll go in, and mind you keep quiet about them Bolshies."

A moment later they were standing in the office.

"A young party of the name of Campion, sir," explained P.C. Peake, "as is troubled about 'is brother 'oo didn't come 'ome last night. Thinks 'e may 'ave got into trouble 'ereabouts."

The Inspector looked curiously at Jim, at his fresh face and well-cut clothes, and liked what he saw.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"Because," said Jim, "he told me last night he'd be back without fail, and that if he wasn't I was to go and look for him, as something would have gone wrong."

The Inspector glanced sharply at Jim. "If it's that sort of house it's that sort of house," he said. "You're old enough to know."

Jim blushed. "It's—it's not that," he stammered.

"Where is the house?"

"33, Stewart Square."

"A bookshop of sorts, sir, name of Park," put in the constable.

"Anything against it?"

"No, sir."

"And you say your brother's there?" to Jim.

"Yes, sir. I'm sure he is. I thought, if you'd let the constable come with me—if not, I'll have to go without him, of course."

"Better not do that. All right, Peake, go with him and have a look at the place."

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Jim gratefully.

(2)

As, fortified by the majesty of the law, Jim made his way to Stewart Square, his content was qualified by anxiety as to what might already have happened. First, he had overslept himself; then he had wasted a whole hour at that wretched police station. If, in the interval, Bill had come to harm, he would never forgive himself.

The content of P.C. Peake, on the other hand, was unqualified by any qualms. He had not the least expectation of discovering anything of professional interest in Stewart Square, but it seemed that nothing short of a domiciliary visit would satisfy the young gentleman. Very well. Warm as was the morning, a short walk was a pleasant change after the monotony of Revel Street; particularly with the promise of refreshment at the journey's end. Marching along with measured tread at Jim's side, he inwardly debated the respective merits of the beer provided by the Ram and Lord Forester's Arms, deciding ultimately in favour of the latter house. In fact, so completely had the original purpose of his outing passed from his mind, that, instead of going straight on into Stewart Square, he turned sharply to the right down Percival Street, where Lord Forester's Arms were waiting to embrace him.

"Here, I say," exclaimed Jim, "where are you going? Surely that's not the way!"

The constable awoke from his happy dream. "What's that? Not the way? Why, there's—oh, quite right, sir, quite right. Dooty first and pleasure afterwards."

In front of Number 33 they stopped.

"That's the house," said Jim eagerly.

"Ah, that's the house," agreed the constable sagely. "And now as you've 'ad a look at it, sir, and seeing as there ain't no sign of your brother, wot about——?"

"I'm going in," said Jim, and started up the steps.

"'Ere, not so fast," expostulated P.C. Peake, making a swift grab and securing Jim's arm. "You can't rush in on to private premises like that. Only get yourself and me into trouble."

"It's not private: it's a shop," argued Jim. "And surely there's no harm in just—just going inside and having a look, as the Inspector said. Besides, there may be no one there: let's see if the door's locked, anyhow."

That sounded reasonable enough.

"Oh, all right," agreed the constable reluctantly. "But look 'ere, sir, you leave this to me. If there's talking to be done, I'll do it."

He tried the door, which, greatly to Jim's relief, was not locked. At all events they would get inside. Round the substantial form of P.C. Peake he had a glimpse of a figure in the shop, bent among dusty books. For an instant he thought it was Bill, and then the man came forward—a sharp-faced fellow of forty or thereabouts, obviously taken aback by the appearance of P.C. Peake.

"Yes?" he inquired.

The constable cleared his throat. "Now," he said, "me and this young gentleman 'ave come 'ere to inquire after 'is brother."

"His brother?" The man looked from the policeman to Jim.

"That's right. 'E says 'e saw 'im 'ere last night——"

"I believe he's in this house," broke in Jim, unable to contain himself any longer. "What have you done with him?"

"Now then, *now then*," said the constable testily, "wot did I tell you outside? Leave this to me, sir, *if* you please."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," said the man. "This gentleman's brother? You're making a mistake: I am alone in the house."

"You 'ear wot e' says?" inquired the constable of Jim.

"Yes, I hear," said Jim, "and I don't believe a word of it. I shan't be satisfied till I've been over the place."

"Look here," demanded Mr. Park's substitute indignantly of P.C. Peake. "What's the idea? What have you got against me?"

The huge wink vouchsafed in reply was fortunately unobserved by Jim.

"You'll 'ave to take 'is word for it, sir," said the constable in his most soothing voice. "'E says your brother's not 'ere——"

"And I say he is," persisted Jim. "And what's more, that chap knows it. If he's got nothing to hide, what's his objection to our searching the house? And what about all that stolen property in the basement?"

"Stolen property!" exclaimed the assistant. "Me! You be careful what you say, young fellow! I'll have the law on you for that, I will. And as for you, constable, p'raps you'll explain just where you come in. Are you bringing a charge against me?"

"I? Good 'Eavens, no," protested P.C. Peake hastily. "I'm not making a charge."

"Search the house if you like," shouted the angry man, flinging open the inner door with a defiant gesture. "Go on, get on with it; and if there's a law in England I'll have it on the pair of you. Stolen property indeed!"

P.C. Peake was winking with the regularity of a lighthouse. Now he turned to Jim.

"That's enough," he said severely. "You've no call to make insinooations against this gentleman. You come out of it now; you've 'ad your look and your brother's not 'ere."

"But I'm certain he is," insisted Jim. "Can't you——?"

"No," said P.C. Peake, "I can't, and, wot's more,

I won't. Not if it's searching the 'ouse you're after. Why, I 'aven't got a warrant."

"Don't let that prevent you," snarled the assistant with savage irony. "Get on with it, and by God! we'll see what the papers have to say about it to-morrow morning. Forcing your way into a chap's house and talking about stolen goods! Seems to me you police think you can do what you please nowadays."

"Now, sir," pleaded the harassed constable, "I do arsk you to go easy. No one's going to search your 'ouse, and if this young feller"—he glared at Jim, whose gentlemanly qualities had become so strangely obscured—"did say something about stolen goods, 'e shouldn't ought to 'ave."

"Well, don't hurry yourself," said the assistant, heavily sarcastic, "but if you've quite done, p'raps you'd kindly get out of my shop. And take that—that young lunatic with you, before I do something to him we might all be sorry for."

The policeman had a firm hold of Jim's arm. "That's right," he said. "We're going, sir, and no offence intended." He pushed Jim towards the door.

"But, look here——" protested that unhappy youth.

"That's enough," said the exasperated constable, with a heavy hand on Jim's shoulder, "or your bloomin' brother won't be the only member of your family in trouble this morning."

(3)

"I wouldn't a' thought it of you," said the policeman reproachfully, when he and Jim were standing in the pavement outside. "No, I wouldn't: not of a nice-spoken young gentleman like you. To go making trouble that way."

"I'll swear that fellow's lying," Jim burst out. "Look here, I can see you don't want to be mixed up in this. You wait here and I'll go back——"

"No, you don't," said P.C. Peake. "That's 'ouse-breaking. Get three years for it, you would. Now chuck it, sir, and let's go along and 'ave——"

"Do you mean to say that though I'm practically certain my brother's inside, and that there's a cellar-full of stolen stuff underground, we can't do anything?"

"That's wot I do mean to say. Except I've got a warrant I can't go in, not if you think there's a 'ouseful of corpses. That's the law, that is."

"Damn the law!" shouted Jim.

"Now none o' that," said P.C. Peake, deeply shocked. "If you don't give over, I shall 'ave to do my dooty by you, same as I would by anyone."

Jim pulled himself together. Nothing was to be gained by showing temper, or, it appeared, by further attempts at stimulating the police in general and P.C. Peake in particular to the invasion of Number 33. He would have to play a lone hand, and, that being so, the sooner he was quit of his escort the better.

"Oh, all right, constable," he said with as good a grace as he could assume. "Sorry I put it like that. If you can't do anything about it, there's no more to be said. It was decent of you to come with me at all."

"That's better. That's more like it. And now—hi, sir, hi, where are you off to now? Wot about that little visit we was going to make?"

Jim had forgotten his promise and was already striding down the square. "What? Oh, yes, very well," he said in a resigned voice. "But we shall have to hurry, as I've got an appointment."

(4)

The clocks had struck twelve, and not one drink but three had cascaded down the capacious gullet of P.C. Peake before Jim could entice him into the street once more.

"Now you remember wot I say, sir," was the constable's parting admonition. "Go 'ome and 'ave a good lay down, and if your young brother ain't in this evening you jest let me know, see? and I'll soon fetch 'im out."

He cleared his throat, straightened his tunic, and set a stately course in the direction of Revel Street, a

spectacle to intimidate the petty offenders and reassure the peaceful residents of Bloomsbury. Or *vice versa*.

Jim watched that majestic but unhelpful form until it had vanished round a corner. Now what was to be his next move? As he grappled with the problem, the street began to heave up and down like the surface of a stormy sea, and he found himself involuntarily clutching at the area railings. For a moment a blackness overswept him, and there was a drumming in his ears, and he thought he was going to faint. Then the street resumed a more or less horizontal plane and his vision cleared, leaving him just very sick and dizzy. That is the kind of thing that may happen when you walk about London with nothing between you and last night's dinner but a hasty cup of coffee, and then, after swallowing a couple of glasses of beer, go and stand in a hot sun. The next move, Jim reluctantly conceded to himself, was to find a place where he could sit down and put some food into an empty stomach. So, with careful but uncertain steps, he sought out a small restaurant where, quickly reviving, he made an ample if hurried meal.

It was a little after one when he was back in front of Number 33. Over his chop he had formed the simplest of plans. He would step inside the front door, and, instead of turning to the left into the shop, would make for the upper regions. Probably Mr. Park's assistant would hear and come after him, but that could not be helped. Before being overhauled Jim would be able to reach the top of the house, opening every door he saw; and, as soon as his detection was certain, he would shout to raise the dead. Bill, if alive and in the house, would surely answer. Doubtless that foxy-faced bounder downstairs would ultimately kick him out, and perhaps hand him over to the police; but the first would mean a row for which Jim was feeling particularly ripe, and the second an unpleasantness which he was quite ready to risk. That anything worse than these alternatives could befall him in Bloomsbury in broad daylight scarcely crossed his mind.

Thus resolved, Jim tiptoed up the front steps and gently grasped the door-handle. It turned, but the door was immovable. Locked! The possibility had not occurred to him. Apparently the shop was shut. After a moment's thought he rang the bell, gathering himself for a dash through the door directly it should be opened. No one came. He rang again and beat a tattoo with the knocker. Nothing happened. Then, on his knees, he pushed open the flap of the letter-box and bawled "Bill!" two or three times, but not a sound came back to him.

He rose in desperation, to find the beginnings of a small crowd collecting in the Square below. There was an errand boy who echoed "Bill!" in an exaggerated falsetto, and someone was inquiring if it was "for a film." There was nothing more to be done, at any rate while a lot of grinning apes were cumbering the pavement. Possibly it was Mr. Park's early closing day, or perhaps his new assistant had taken fright and bolted; or perhaps he was inside, but not proposing to admit any more visitors.

Jim, looking murder at the errand-boy, ran down the steps and walked briskly out of the square.

(5)

He had failed again. After dark he might try to force his way into the house, but he had little faith in his house-breaking capacity. There remained Aunt Aggie. Possibly the tale she would put up to the police would be more plausible than his had been. Aunt Aggie might help; but it was just as likely that Aunt Aggie would do nothing of the kind. A little vaguer than her sister, Mrs. Campion, she was slightly deaf and had the type of mind that refuses to concentrate for more than a minute on any subject. She would listen to the first sentence, and then, pleasantly smiling, allow her thoughts to wander elsewhere; and when you had finished explaining, you would find she had jumped to a totally wrong conclusion. Still, Aunt Aggie was a hope, if only a forlorn hope.

So back to Aunt Aggie's Jim went, as fast as a taxi could take him. He found her struggling with accounts in her sitting-room on the first floor of the big house in Tranton Gardens.

"Seven and sixpence and thirteen and ninepence," she was murmuring—"oh, Jim, it's you. What do seven and sixpence and thirteen and ninepence make?"

Jim made a frenzied calculation. "Twenty-one and threepence," he answered. "Aunt Aggie——"

"So they do. How quick of you, dear! You must get that from your poor father. *My* family was never any good at arithmetic. Shoes—shoes—how much *were* those shoes?"

"Aunt Aggie, can I speak to you for a moment?"

"Yes, dear. Forty-one and six, I think. And then Mrs. Denby's bill—oh dear, how I hate accounts!"

"Aunt Aggie, do put the beastly things away. Something frightfully serious has happened. It's Bill."

"I'm rather cross with Bill," said Aunt Aggie, jotting down several figures with feverish decision. "It's very casual of him to go off without a word, leaving his belongings strewn about my spare room. That kind of thing upsets servants nowadays. Few people have any idea how difficult it is to keep a house like this going. With a basement too."

"Yes, Aunt Aggie——"

"Only this morning the kitchen-maid gave notice," continued Aunt Aggie, as though Bill were to blame for the disaster.

"Aunt Aggie, *please* listen. I'm horribly worried about Bill. I believe he's in awful trouble."

"I can quite believe that," was Aunt Aggie's placid reply, "though really Bill's old enough to know better. I never knew such a family. Why, when the twins were here in the Spring they were never out of trouble. I remember——"

"But this time it's serious," pleaded Jim desperately. "Honestly it is. You must hear me out."

"Oh, very well, my dear, but be as quick as you can, as I simply haven't a moment this afternoon."

Aunt Aggie firmly believed that she was one of the busiest people in London. "There are these accounts, and I promised to look in at Mrs. Crosthwaite's for tea. You remember Mrs. Crosthwaite, Jim? She's——"

"Yes, yes," said Jim hurriedly. "It's like this, Aunt Aggie," and for the third time that day he plunged into his tale. Repetition, he reflected ruefully as he stumbled through it, did not seem to make it any less bald and unconvincing. Yet he need not have worried, for had he not been so absorbed in his task he would have noticed that Aunt Aggie's attention barely survived his opening sentence. Her eyes wandered back to her accounts or out of the window, and once she furtively snatched up her engagement book and searched for some entry she suspected herself of having forgotten.

"Aunt Aggie, are you listening?"

"Of course I am, Jim. Go on."

"But that's all."

Aunt Aggie beamed. "Well, I think it all sounds most exciting. You know I want you and Bill to have a good time when you come up. But you haven't told me when he's coming back, have you? I want to know, because it's Framling's evening out, and if——"

"You haven't heard a word I've been saying," accused Jim.

"Oh yes, I have. Perhaps I didn't quite follow it all, because there was such a lot of it, wasn't there?"

"Aunt Aggie, you must understand. Bill's disappeared."

"Surely, you're exaggerating, dear. You told me yesterday that Bill was spending the night with some friends. And now he seems to have gone off with them somewhere. It's absurd to talk of his disappearing, just because he hasn't come back yet. I never expect any of you till I see you."

"What I told you last night wasn't true," confessed Jim. "Bill wasn't with friends: he was at this bookshop place in Stewart Square."

"I suppose it was one of your silly jokes," said Aunt Aggie severely. "You know I don't like them, Jim, but you and Bill are incorrigible. Still, I'm glad you've owned up."

"I've tried the police, and they won't believe me," Jim persisted.

"I don't wonder. You're very naughty, Jim."

"But, Aunt Aggie, don't you see that we must do something? These people might *kill* Bill. I thought if—if you were to speak to the police, perhaps——"

Aunt Aggie laughed good-temperedly. "No, dear, I'm not quite such an innocent. And, Jim, you really shouldn't make fun of the police. They don't like it, and I don't blame them. And now—good gracious, it's after half-past three. I must put on my things *at once*."

"Aunt Aggie, for goodness' sake——"

"I shall expect you for dinner, and Bill too, if he can tear himself away from his friends."

"Aunt Aggie!"

But she was gone.

(6)

It must be conceded that Jim might have managed his affairs better; that so far, with the best intentions, he had contrived to make a glorious mess of his mission. Yet when you are seventeen and suddenly faced with the crisis of your young life, and when, in addition, since eight o'clock in the morning everyone you have met has appeared to be in a conspiracy to thwart you, some allowance must be made.

Without much idea of what he was going to do next, Jim had some tea and then—without undue haste—returned to Stewart Square. That, after all, was where he had last seen Bill; and there was the chance that Mr. Park's assistant would be back and that it would be possible to force an entry. It was a little after five o'clock, the close of a day of misspent effort, when Jim wearily mounted the steps of Number 33 once more.

But just as he was about to grasp the handle, the door opened suddenly, and he came face to face with a tall female in a rusty black hat, who gave a faint scream and dropped a shapeless bag on the ground. The bag, after one bounce, began to roll down the front steps, and Jim, a polite youth, bent forward to catch it. As he restored it to its owner, the heavy front door closed with a click. "Damn!" he muttered to himself.

"Lor'!" said the lady, who was now standing on the steps clutching herself in the region of the heart; "what a turn you did give me! I thought you was one of them cat-burglars."

"I'm very sorry," said Jim, who was wondering how, short of assault and battery, he could obtain possession of the lady's latchkey.

"And then," she continued conversationally, "I thought you was the other young gentleman come back, which I now sees you're not."

"What other young gentleman?" inquired Jim, suppressing his excitement.

"Why, the one as gave me jest such another turn yesterday. Sitting among the books 'e was, when I come in to do my bit o' cleanin'. 'Good-evenin',' says 'e sudden-like, 'an' wot can I do for you?' An' my 'eart not bein' wot it was, I couldn't say a word. A pleasant-spoken young gentleman, too, for all the turn 'e gave me. It was 'e told me about pore Mr. Park's accident."

"How very alarming!" said Jim sympathetically. "And what's happened to him—the young gentleman?"

"That's wot I want to know," replied Mrs. Hackitt, "seein' as 'e should be lookin' after the books while Mr. Park's in 'orspital. 'E didn't ought to slip off, though I'm sure I don't blame 'im at 'is age, if it's a bit o' fun 'e's wantin'. Maria 'Ackitt's not one of your spoil-sports."

"Then he isn't here now?"

"That 'e isn't. Nor no one else."

"So the house is empty?"

"That's wot I've said. Though wot business it is

of yours, young man, I'm sure *I* don't know—keeping me standin' 'ere answerin' questions when I ought to be gettin' 'ome to tea."

She gathered her bag more closely to her and descended the first step.

"I say," said Jim hurriedly, "I suppose you wouldn't care to lend me your latchkey a moment?"

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Mrs. Hackitt, outraged. "Lend you my latchkey indeed! I should think not. There's impudence for you. You get out of my way, young man, or I'll call a policeman. I'm a respectable woman, I'll 'ave you know."

"Look here," said Jim, resolving on candour, "I'm his brother—the young gentleman's."

"Oh, are you?" retorted Mrs. Hackitt suspiciously. "That's easy said, that is."

"I'm frightfully worried about my brother, as he never came home last night. That's why I want to see if he's in the house."

"Well, 'e isn't," said Mrs. Hackitt shortly. "No one isn't."

"My name's Campion," Jim went on.

"Campion!" The lady paused. "'Ow do you spell it?"

"C-A-M-P-I-O-N."

"Lor'!" she remarked. "Lor', if that ain't strange! Not Mr. J. Campion, by any chance?"

"Yes, yes," said Jim eagerly.

"Well!" She fumbled in her bag. "Well, if that ain't what they call a coincidence!" She produced a crumpled slip of paper. "This'll be for you, then. There it is, wrote quite plain, 'J. Campion.' I found it on the landing of the first floor when I was doin' my bit o' cleanin'."

Jim took the slip with trembling fingers. The writing, though shaky, was certainly Bill's. He unfolded the paper and read three words:

"Going Wiltshire. Bill."

Jim gave a little gasp. "Thank you," he said, "that's what I wanted to know."

CHAPTER IX

RENDEZVOUS

(1)

TOO late to catch the 5.15 from Paddington, Jim boarded the Chippenham slip on the 7.30. As he sank thankfully into a corner seat, he turned over in his mind the short message which had come like a ray of light to cheer the end of quite the most wretched day he had ever spent.

"Going Wiltshire. Bill." It was not very definite. Wiltshire, though a small county, covers plenty of destinations. "Wiltshire" should mean Stavrock, but if Bill meant Stavrock, why should he be vague about it? Was it because he did not know his exact destination, or because he wanted to put on paper something which could not convey too much to a chance discoverer like Mrs. Hackitt. Again, was Bill a free agent? If he was, why should he choose so uncertain a method of communication as a slip of paper dropped on the landing of a strange house, when he could so easily have given his message over the telephone? If he was not, why was he going to Wiltshire?

The train was due to start in two minutes, and a slamming of doors down its length marked the progress of the ticket inspector. There was one other passenger in Jim's compartment, a tallish man half hidden behind the *Evening Standard*, round a corner of which Jim had a glimpse of a tanned face.

"Tickets, please."

The other man put aside his paper. "Right for Stavrock?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. This coach is slipped at Chippenham and you get a train on from there in a few minutes."

Jim surveyed his companion with mild interest. There were perhaps six houses in the neighbourhood of Stavrock to which a man travelling with a first-class ticket might be bound, and the owners of these were all old friends. He was still speculating on the man's host when the train, with the slightest of jerks, drew out of Paddington. Then he lay back comfortably in his corner and, dog-tired after his long and wearing day, was fast asleep before the train was clear of London.

He woke up soon after Reading. The express was pounding westward through the night. His travelling companion had laid aside his paper and had in his hand a book, which did not, however, appear to be holding his attention. When Jim gave the half-ashamed grin of the caught sleeper, the man smiled back at him.

"These trains can travel," he commented.

"Yes," Jim agreed. "A mile a minute to Chippenham. But the local on to Stavrock is a crawler."

"Ah! You know Stavrock?"

"Live there. Good spot, isn't it?"

"I've never been there," said the man. "In fact, I've been out of England for years and only crossed over from the Continent yesterday."

Jim ruminated sleepily. So he had only crossed from the Continent yesterday. Wasn't there someone else?—But the man was speaking again.

"Perhaps you can tell me the best place to put up for a night in the village?"

"There's the Lion," said Jim, "but it's a one-horse show."

What would the fellow's business be? He might be an artist, of course, though he scarcely looked the part

"I suppose you know Miss Plinn?" the man went on to say.

Jim started. "Yes," he said. "Very well. Why?"

"I was hoping to find her at Stavrock."

Jim paused. "Was—is she expecting you?" he asked slowly.

"Well, not exactly. But I sent her a line from abroad to warn her that I was coming."

The pieces in the little puzzle which Jim had been sleepily putting together in his brain suddenly fell into place. Who would have crossed from the Continent yesterday? Who would be on his way to Stavrock to see Mary? Was not expected? Had sent a letter—no, surely a postcard—of warning? Who was it? Who could it be? Fully awake, Jim might have hesitated before answering these questions, might have discovered objections to the blinding certainty which now smote him: that there, sitting opposite to him, was the Man himself. As it was, all the suppressed fury of the day—against Peake, against Mr. Park's assistant, against Aunt Aggie, against himself—as though fired by this sudden conviction, burst into eruption.

David Faversham, peaceably ensconced in his corner, saw the boy stare intently at him, saw his pleasant face break into a murderous frown; and the next moment ten stone weight of solid Campion had hurled itself across the compartment, and a pair of vigorous young hands were clutching his throat.

David, taken by surprise, was nearly sent to the floor by that fierce onset; but he recovered in time. He had always been an awkward customer in a rough house, and twelve months of *khud* climbing and spare living had hardened his muscles and removed superfluous fat. Jim, a mere stripling, was quickly outmatched. One hand loosened the grip on the throat, while the other bent the boy backwards, further and further, until with a sudden wrench David was on his feet and had pinned his panting adversary to the opposite seat.

"You young tiger!" he said. "What the devil do you mean by it?"

Jim lay back, glowering but helpless.

"What have you done with them, you swine?" he gasped.

"I haven't the remotest idea what you're talking about," said David cheerfully. "Is this a bad joke, or are you a homicidal lunatic? And are we going to travel like this the whole way to Chippenham?"

"I don't care a dam how we travel," snapped Jim. "Chippenham is the first stop, and when we get there we'll see what the police have to say."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said David. "You've got a cheek! One moment we are chatting amicably, and the next you're trying to strangle me. And now you threaten me with the police. You can go ahead, my lad. When you've fetched your Bobby, I may have something to say to him."

"So will I," said Jim. "If you think you can go about threatening people and kidnapping them, you're jolly well mistaken."

"Again you've got me guessing," said David, and suddenly released the boy. "I think you'd better sit up and tell me what your trouble is. Incidentally, in case you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, my name's Faversham."

Jim, raising himself, stared and stammered. "Not—not Major Faversham? The chap who was with the Plinns at Sogdiana?"

"The same. I'm just home on leave and thought I'd run down and see how Mary was getting on."

Jim swallowed several times before answering.

"I say!" he exclaimed at last in consternation. "Good Lord! Look here, I believe I've made an awful bloomer."

"I believe you have," agreed David a little grimly.

"You're the chap—I've heard Miss Gilchrist talk about you—and I believed—O Lord! You must think me a pretty ghastly idiot."

"If you'll tell me what you believed," said David, "I'll answer your question."

" I thought you were the chap who's been bothering Mary."

" What chap? "

" This—this Bukholin—or whatever his name is. He started sending her picture postcards and threatening to come down on her."

" The devil he did. I shall have to talk to Mary about that."

" But you can't. Of course, you haven't heard. Mary's disappeared."

" What! " It was David's turn to sit up. " Come on," he said, " let's have the whole story. You may as well know that this is pretty serious."

" I know it is," said poor Jim. " The trouble is that I can't get anyone to believe me. There's only Bill, and Bill's disappeared too."

" Begin at the beginning," commanded David, " and don't leave anything out. We've still an hour before we're due at Chippenham."

Once more Jim told his tale, keeping nothing back from the first listener he had had who was not frankly incredulous or only spasmodically attentive. Indeed, this Faversham man seemed to find nothing for astonishment, though much for alarm, in the story.

" So you see," Jim ended, " when you told me you had just crossed from the Continent, and that you were on your way to see Mary and had written to her, I had that appalling brain-wave. Hope I didn't hurt you, sir."

David's preoccupied face broke into a smile. " Oh dear, no," he said. " I'm afraid it was the other way round. However, we'll agree to forget that unfortunate episode. By the way, you've told me everything except your name."

" Campion—Jim Campion."

" Right. Now listen. All this is pretty nasty. I had a letter myself from this fellow Bukholin, and in it he threatened to bother Mary. That was one reason why I hurried home. He's not a man to boggle at ways and means "

"Murder?" inquired Jim in an awed voice, and David nodded.

"I remember now that Mary said something about his being the murderer of her father."

"That was just about the truth of it. If I could lay my hands on that fellow! Oh, it's easy to talk," David added bitterly. "The fact remains that he seems to have got Mary already."

"And Bill too, probably," added Jim.

"Probably," David agreed. "Otherwise that message would have been more explicit. You'll know for certain when you get home."

"You'll come to us, won't you, sir?" asked Jim. "Mother will be delighted to put you up, I know."

"That would be very kind of her. It certainly would be an advantage for us to be under the same roof."

"How shall we set to work?"

"Wait and see if there's any news at your end," replied David. "By this time the police may have a clue, though I'm not too hopeful."

The train checked, there was a jarring of brakes, and the first scattered lights of a town danced by the windows.

"Chippenham," announced Jim.

A minute later the slipped coach slid to a standstill along the platform, while its spawning parent sped on to Bath.

(2)

It was Peggy who met her brother and the unexpected guest at the door of Havilden Hall.

"Where's Bill?" was her first question.

"I hoped he was here."

Peggy shook her head. "Mother's in an awful state," she confided in a low voice. "First Mary and now Bill. Jimmy, what does it all mean?"

Instead of answering, Jim introduced David, at whom Peggy smiled falsely, despair at her heart.

"Idiot!" she hissed in a fierce aside to her brother. But to the guest—unwelcome at such a time as he was—she was charming. "I do hope you'll be comfortable. Jim should have warned us and we'd have had things ready. I—I'm afraid my mother's very worried just at present."

David shook off his embarrassment. "It's a shame to invade you like this," he said, "but your brother wouldn't hear of my going to the local inn."

"No, of course," murmured Peggy. "Jimmy, what *can* have happened to Bill?"

"Pegs, I don't know. We're going to put our heads together. Look here, come along to the dining-room and let's forage for something to eat."

Jim left David munching sandwiches and sought out his mother. He found her without doubt the most distracted lady in Wiltshire, so engulfed by a sea of troubles, in which she plunged with bewildering rapidity from one false conclusion to another, that the arrival of her second son with a guest at the hour of 10.30 p.m. was a trifle—an additional whiff of spray, as it were, among the breakers. True, she attempted a passing protest. "You know I'm aways glad to see your friends, dear," she said, "but I do think, with such dreadful things happening, it's hardly the time to ask people."

Jim tried to explain that the new arrival was a friend of Mary's, adding unwisely that he had only landed in England the day before.

"Oh," exclaimed Mrs. Campion, "then surely he must be the person who was annoying Mary!"

"No, no," protested Jim. But the identification remained embedded in his mother's mind, like a rock in a stormy ocean.

"I shall have to speak to him," she murmured as she hurried away to ring up the Chief Constable for the seventh time that day. "I promised Mary I would. I don't believe any of these awful things would have happened if he hadn't behaved so oddly."

Later she swept into the dining-room. It was a relief in her present mood to find listeners at whom she might discharge her distresses in a flood of talk.

"Oh dear," she began, "I've just rung up Colonel Colgate again and he's heard nothing. Would you believe it possible for a sensible girl to disappear completely in Bath and the police to know nothing about it? I feel so dreadfully responsible, with her staying here. And, Jim, I do think you might have let me know you weren't coming home yesterday. I quite began to think you had had an accident, and was on the point of ringing up Aunt Aggie, and you know how she hates trunk calls. You children must be more considerate. Where Bill is I have no idea, and when you didn't come back either, it was beginning to be like the Ten Little Nigger boys, only much more serious. I'm really cross with Bill. He oughtn't to go off to London like that without a word. And if the police have no news of Mary to-morrow, I don't know what we shall do. I'm so dreadfully afraid she's fallen into the hands of some of those horrible people who—— Peggy darling, I'm sure you ought to be going to bed. I do hope your bed will be long enough for you, Mr.—Mr.——" ("Major Faversham," put in Jim)—"but really I haven't been able to attend to anything to-day, and some of our beds are very old-fashioned. Nothing like this has ever happened to us before, except when we had a house in London just before Bill was born, Jim, and burglars broke in and took your great-aunt Fanny's diamond necklace which had just come from the bank. Oh, and Mr.—Mr.——" ("Major Faversham," put in Jim)—"Mr. Faversham, though I'm sure Jim said you were a foreigner, or was it Mary? Anyhow, I think I ought to tell you that I consider you're very much to blame——"

"I!" inquired David, a little startled.

"*Very* much to blame," repeated Mrs. Campion firmly, "for what's happened to Mary. In England

we have such different ideas about these things, and if you're not a foreigner there's even less excuse. I'm sure you didn't mean any harm, but you certainly upset Mary very much. I thought of getting the Vicar to talk to you in a friendly way, and explain that you really shouldn't do that sort of thing. On postcards too. But Mary——"

"Mother," Jim at last broke in on her flow, "you're right off the mark."

"Now, Jim, you ought not to interrupt me. Mr.—Mr. Faversham, I hope, will understand my point when he's thought it over. And now I expect you're all ready for bed, though I'm sure I shan't close my eyes the whole night, thinking of what may have happened to Mary."

The poor lady talked herself out of the room.

(3)

Janet Gilchrist was not given, as a habit, to idle fancies, such weaknesses, when detected in others, being "just foolishness," which category they shared with most of her disapprobata. In her forthright way she was as severe with herself as with her neighbours, and when, on her arrival at Cairns, she caught herself from time to time wondering a little uneasily how Mary was getting on, she made staunch efforts to harry vain imaginings out of her head. But, harry as she might, they persisted in returning, particularly at the hour of 6 a.m., when Janet, impatiently abed, was wont to ask herself why it was impossible to get an English or Scots household stirring before the best of the morning was past.

Yet what, after all, could happen to anyone in a place like Stavrock? Sogdiana? A memory now, blurred by Time. Nerves? Havers! The nonsense people talked about nerves nowadays! Besides, Mary was sensible. She had had a bad shock and, as a daughter of Janplin's should, she had taken to herself new interests. The child had been right to go to

Stavrock and shoulder the burdens of the estate. No moping. No morbid brooding. No shutting herself up. Plenty of work and plenty of friends. Then what, in the name of common-sense, was she, Janet, fretting about? At this point she would exclaim impatiently and, setting a wiry leg on the carpet, cross to the window to scent the first freshness of a morning in the Pentlands.

Then a letter came from David, doubly welcome for his long silence and the word it brought of his impending return.

"I'm coming home at once," he wrote. That was good, but what followed was not so good. "I'm not happy about Mary. I have an idea that Bukholin, the scoundrel who worked the rising at Sogdiana, may be troubling her. I have had a strange, rather threatening letter from him. Do you know if he has approached her? There are reasons, though, why she might not tell even you if he had. It may be bluff, but I can't forget that once before we thought that fellow was bluffing, and he wasn't. Anyhow, I'm coming home to see for myself."

Very odd and very mysterious! Why should a Commissar from Central Asia want to plague a girl in Wiltshire? Inwardly she cursed David for his discretion. Of course it was all news to her. Mary had not hinted a word of any trouble, though there had been that curious impression during those last weeks that all was not absolutely right, of a check, as it were, in the girl's convalescence. It was a little disturbing, the more so as David was no scaremonger. Pondering those few, unrevealing lines, Janet had a renewed sense of disquiet.

The next day brought another surprise—a letter from Mary announcing her move to the Campions'. Why? She gave no reason, and it had been hard enough in all conscience to shift her before, even to obtain the promise of a visit to Cairns in August. And now she, who had anchored herself so stubbornly to Stavrock, had suddenly flitted. So there was

another little puzzle. Not that the change in itself was bad. Havilden was a cheerful houseful of pleasant folk—just what Mary needed. But why? Her disquiet still grew.

Next morning she was pottering over odd jobs in the garden, when a boy with a telegram appeared among her borders.

"Very anxious about Mary" (she read), "went to Bath yesterday afternoon and has not returned.

"Campion."

She stood very still for a moment, holding the telegram in her hand and staring over the boy's head at the first low crestline of the Pentlands. "An answer? Yes. Wait, no, there'll be no answer." What reply could she make to a rigmarole like that? It was the kind of message a havering creature like Charlotte Campion would send. (In her perturbation Janet was a little less than fair to that lady.) There was only one thing to do—and without delay.

She strode back to the house.

"Tell Rorison I want him at once."

Rorison emerged from the back regions.

"Bring the car round in half an hour."

"Very good, madam."

"And see there's plenty of petrol. We're going to England."

Rorison suppressed a groan of dismayed astonishment.

"Wull it be for long now, madam?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Janet tartly. "You'd best be packing some things for yourself."

As she disappeared to see to her own packing, Rorison approached as near to blasphemy as an austere upbringing in the United Free Kirk of Scotland would admit. "Please God," he muttered, "this'll be the end of that auld hell-device."

He was referring to a certain touring car of French make.

CHAPTER X

PRISONERS

(1)

THE most important fact in Bill's world was his head. At least, while he supposed it was his head, it was not at all the sort of head that he remembered. Once quite an ordinary head, it was now apparently inflated to monstrous proportions, so that it had become as heavy as a cannon-ball and as vast as a balloon. It still belonged to him in the sense of being able to hurt him, but in no other. It would have been rather funny if it had not been so confoundedly painful. In a muddled way he began to wonder what he could have been doing the night before. He was, of course, in his little bedroom at B.N.C., and this must be the morning after—something particularly festive and excessively liquid; a bump supper perhaps. If he had guessed that he was going to get a head like this as a result . . . but that was funny, because he now remembered quite clearly that he had left Oxford nearly twelve months back. Floating a little nearer to consciousness, he opened his eyes, gave a gasp of pain, and hurriedly closed them again. Phew! That was unpleasant. But where was he? Very gingerly he half-opened his eyes again. No, he was not in his room at home either. Then where the mischief was he? He lay very still to cope with the problem. Had he had an accident? Or been ill? If only his head would stop buzzing he could think it out. Slowly it began to come to him that he had been to London. Mr. Park . . . his shop . . . the accident . . . the meeting . . . the events of his

visit swam hazily back to him. But even now he could not explain his present whereabouts and this appalling, anti-Pussyfoot head.

Wait! It was coming. He had been collared, hiding behind the books in the first floor back at 33, Stewart Square. That foul "Chairman" fellow with a made-up face had ordered him to be taken upstairs; and he had sat on Mr. Park's frowsy bed for the better part of an hour, with a chap watching him, revolver in hand. Then they had been summoned downstairs again. The others were all in the Board-room drinking coffee, and there was a cup for him. "We are taking you for a little journey," Bukholin had said, pleasantly enough. "Where?" he had demanded. "Why, to Wiltshire; to see Miss Plinn. That was what you wanted, eh?" And the brute had laughed in a nasty, noiseless way that had made him feel most uncomfortable. However, he was very thirsty and had drunk off his coffee. Then they had all moved on to the landing. There was some hitch, for he had been kept standing there for five minutes. It was dark, and during the wait he had furtively fished a scrap of paper out of his pocket and scribbled a message for Jim. He had dropped it on the landing—and hoped for the best.

He remembered feeling very sleepy, and the man who was with him coming forward and putting his face close to his. Someone had called up the staircase, "Well?" And the man had answered, "In a moment, I think." Then they had started to go down, and—and that was about the last thing he could recall.

Of course, what a perfect idiot he had been! That coffee must have been doped. Hence the sudden break in his memory. Hence, too, the head. They had drugged him, bundled him unconscious into a waiting car, and carted him off—where? To Wiltshire, if Bukholin had been speaking the truth. Bukholin had said he was to see Mary, and if the one

statement held good, probably the other would too. But where in Wiltshire?

With returning consciousness Bill began to take in particulars of the room. It was, it seemed, a kind of outhouse, with rough stone walls, a paved floor, and an arched roof supported by heavy, transverse beams. It was lighted by two tapering, unglazed windows, like arrow slits, through which a thin streak of daylight penetrated. He was lying, fully clothed, on a rough bed, and in the corner was a gim-crack washstand, surmounted by a cheap shaving-glass. One wooden chair completed the furniture. At the end of his bed was a door; and, as his eye rested on it, Bill gathered himself together, lowered a foot to the ground, and tried to stand up. At once the room spun like a roundabout at a fair, his head throbbed with excruciating pangs, and he fell back on the bed with a groan.

He was pulling himself together for a second attempt when the door opened very quietly and someone came in. It was a man, short but enormously broad, with a head like a block of wood and squat bandy legs. He came straight to Bill's side and stood by the bed looking down at him. Bill met his stare with opened eyes.

"Well," said the man in a husky voice, "that's more like it, that is. Feelin' better?"

"If you really want to know," replied Bill, "I'm feeling like nothing on earth."

The man grinned, not unkindly. "You must 'ave made quite a night of it," he observed.

"Where am I?" demanded Bill.

"Ah! Them as arsks no questions isn't told no lies."

"All right," retorted Bill. "Wherever I am, I'm off just as soon as my head stops playing the goat."

"Oh, you are, are you? Now see 'ere, you and me's going to get on fine s'long as you stays 'ere good and quiet, see? But if you goes for to try to 'op it"—he lifted a fist like a leg of mutton—"this little pal of

mine's goin' to 'ave something to say to your 'andsome face."

"Thanks," said Bill feebly, "I don't think I'll have any just yet."

"That's right. There's many a lad as 'as wished arterwards 'e'd 'ad the sense to think twice afore talking to my little pal. George's night-cap, they useter call him, jesting-like."

"A pretty wit. And you're George."

"That's me. George and never mind the rest. And now, if there's anything you want, short o' packin' up and sayin' good-bye, you let me know, and if so be as it ain't contrary to orders, I'll oblige."

"Well," said Bill, "what I really want is a darned good drink, but I'll go without if you're intending to put any more of your filthy dope into it."

"Lord love yer," said the man, guffawing as though this were a rare joke. "That's not me, that ain't. If I wanted to put yer to sleep, I'd jest——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Bill hurriedly, "I'll take your word for it. And I say, would you mind not laughing quite so loud, or standing over me as if we were in the middle of the fourteenth round and you weren't taking any chances?"

This sally provoked wheezing convulsions. "Now you wait a minute," George said, "and I'll bring you a cup o' tea. Gorblimey, but I likes a chap as can take a bit o' fun."

Fortified by a cup of very strong tea, and supported by George's massive arm, Bill found his feet and plunged his aching brow into a basin of cold water. In the shaving-glass he caught a glimpse of his face, comically dissipated and grimy. "I say, I'm filthy," he said ruefully.

"I'll tell you wot," replied the amiable George. "I'll get you a mug of 'ot water and a razor, and you can clean-up like. 'Ow's that?"

"George," murmured Bill gratefully, "I'm bound to admit that you're a sportsman."

"That's me," agreed George cordially. "I know

wot a young gent wants when 'e's 'ad a night out, so ter speak. Arter I left the Ring I was vally for a bit to—well, never mind 'oo to—a tip-top chap 'e was an' no mistake. I got the water on the boil."

He vanished, to reappear in a couple of minutes with a jug of hot water and some shaving tackle. While Bill furbished himself up, he stood by, proudly possessive, as though the restoration of Bill to respectability were his special achievement.

"George," said Bill, when he had finished, "you and I have got to have a talk."

"That's right," George agreed.

"In the first place, is Miss Plinn here?"

"Ah! You wants ter know a lot, you do," was the grinning reply.

"Meaning that she is. I want to see her, George."

George looked very dubious. "That ain't in the book o' rules," he said at length. "Straight it ain't. Nor it ain't not if you take me."

"I don't quite."

"They 'aven't said you're to meet, and they 'aven't said you're not to meet."

"Well, what about it? Come on, George. Surely you're not afraid. Why, even if I were fit I wouldn't have a cat's chance with you."

"You wouldn't," George concurred, beaming at this tribute.

"I was sure," continued Bill diplomatically, "that a sportsman like you wouldn't cut up rough over such a small favour."

George scratched his head and looked troubled. "Well, well," he said at last, "if you puts it like that, it's 'ard to refuse. But mind," he added ferociously, "if you try on any tricks with me, I'll—I'll——"

"Tricks!" laughed Bill. "My dear George, do I look like tricks? Bless you, it's as much as I can do to keep on my feet."

"I'm too kind-'earted," grumbled George, as he led the way out. "I always was."

(2)

After all, Mary was no further than next door. She was in just such a room as Bill's, though for her benefit George and his employers had made more ambitious attempts at furnishing. There was a big square of loose linoleum on the floor, the bed had sheets and a spring mattress, there was something which might in flattery have been described as a toilet-table, and there was another table off which meals might be eaten. There was even a lop-sided deck chair, in which, as Bill entered in George's wake, Mary was sitting.

"Bill!" She jumped to her feet; a little pale perhaps, and with a new, watchful look in her eyes and the tiniest of lines about the mouth; otherwise none the worse for her imprisonment.

"Hullo," said Bill.

"Bill, how perfectly splendid! How did you get in?" She ignored the hovering presence of George at the door.

"I haven't the foggiest idea," confessed Bill. "What I do want to know is how we're both going to get out."

"Now then," came in warning tones from the door.

"But," faltered Mary, "then—then you're—oh, Bill, and I thought for a moment it was all right."

"Sorry, old thing. They nabbed me too, filled me up with some foul drug, and posted me here carriage paid."

"You poor dear!" said Mary sympathetically. "Is it perfectly beastly of me to be glad that you *are* here, all the same?"

"Rotten. I say, how about you?"

"I? I've never been so furious in all my life."

"That's right," came from George. "Lor', missy, the things you said to me!" He chuckled with reminiscent appreciation.

Mary became suddenly aware of his presence. "Oh, Mr. Sykes——" she began.

"Now, missy," pleaded George reproachfully, "'ow often 'ave I begged you not to call me that!"

"Well, George then——"

"Ah, that's better."

"Will you be an angel and get me a cup of tea?"

"Certainly I will," said the amenable George. "I've took the water off the boil, so it'll be a matter o' five minutes afore it's ready; but you shall 'ave it, missy." Turning to Bill, he added, "You'll 'ave to come back now."

"Oh, do let him stay," begged Mary. "Just for five minutes. He's a particular friend of mine, George, and I get so lonely in here all by myself."

Either "particular friend" conveyed an equally particular meaning to George, or the thought of feminine loneliness was too much for his tender heart, but with a minatory "Mind out wot I was a-tellin' you jest now" to Bill, he left them together and withdrew, locking the door behind him.

"Quick!" said Mary. "Bill, we've got to get out of here."

"Yes, but where are we?"

"Haven't you guessed? The Priory Farm."

"Good Lord!"

Bill adjusted himself to this astonishing fact. The Priory Farm was certainly a cunning choice. Round three sides of it the river made a wide sweep, and on the fourth side meadow and orchard met the great coverts of Charton where they dropped down the side of Havilden Hill. Stavrock, the nearest village, was a couple of miles round by way of the Abbey bridge, close to which, at the bottom of Havilden Hill, a private road—little more than a cart track—leading from the Farm and following the twists of the Avon, came out. Yes, it was a clever choice. There was no other house within a mile; the Farm lay in one of the most remote backwaters of Wiltshire, as secluded as if its site were in the centre of Salisbury Plain. Their particular prison was the old ruinous priory, on

to which the modern farm buildings had been grafted. Bill had been inside the place before, many years ago, but in its present half-finished state he had not recognised it, especially as he had scarcely expected to find himself so close to his home.

"Quite," remarked Mary, in reply to Bill's surprised ejaculation. "I'm in my own farm, if you please, which I myself let to that pig with a black beard who pretended to be sketching the Abbey. And I used to call him 'my windfall,'" she added bitterly. "Bill, what are we going to do?"

"Who are here?"

"There's George and a man I've only just seen who does the marketing. And Constantine himself, I suppose, though he keeps in the background."

"Then there's old man Bukholin and his merry party from London."

"Yes. Bill, that man gives me the creeps. We had our first heart-to-heart yesterday—short and sharp, and not at all sweet. I'm sure he's got some horrible plan."

"From the little I've seen of him, I should say he oozes horrible plans. George is another matter. I have hopes of George. More brawn than brain. I feel we may do something with George."

"Be careful, Bill. I believe he's a retired prize-fighter of sorts."

"Sure thing. My idea is to be very nice to George."

"We'll blandish him," agreed Mary. "Just at first I was rather cross with him."

"Wrong tack. We've got to reach George's better nature. First point is to persuade him to let us stay together; there's heaps we must talk about. Look out, here he comes. Sob stuff," Bill ended in a whisper, as footsteps stamped along the passage outside.

George arrived, breathing heavily into a cup of tea, to find his two charges plunged in gloom. Bill was sitting dejectedly at the table. Mary, handkerchief in hand and with her back to her companion, was furtively dabbing her eyes.

George put down the cup with a thump that slopped a quarter of its contents into the saucer. He stared at Mary's back view and then turned a menacing brow on Bill.

"Wot you bin doin' to 'er?" he demanded in a fierce whisper.

"*I've* not been doing anything," replied Bill in a meaning voice. "But I think *you* ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Wot, I?" exclaimed George, taken aback.

"Yes, you. Shutting a girl up by herself in a filthy hole like this."

George gasped at this onslaught. "I ain't shut 'er up," he protested. "I only done wot I could to make 'er comfortable. 'Tain't exactly a 'ome from 'ome, but I done wot I could."

"Shutting her up in a place like a cellar," pursued Bill severely, "and leaving her to cry her heart out."

"'Ere, you give over," exclaimed George. "I've 'ad my orders, and I 'as to execute them."

"I wouldn't have thought it of you, George," said Bill sadly; "not of a sportsman like you."

Mary made a valiant effort to control her grief. "You mustn't be hard on George, Bill," she pleaded in a voice so sweetly sad that the stoniest of hearts would have melted. "He doesn't mean to be unkind, do you, George? It's—it's—j-just——" She turned away again with shaking shoulders.

After a moment of painful irresolution, George hung over her, lacerated. "Now, missy, missy," he protested. "Old George wouldn't lay a finger on you, not if the King 'imself was to tell him. Don't cry, missy, and—and—'ere, guv'nor"—in a husky whisper —"can't you stop 'er?"

"I'll try," said Bill, kneeling at Mary's side. "Mary, George doesn't mean to harm you. He's got a good heart and he'll do all he can, won't you, George?" A series of emphatic nods encouraged Bill to continue: "He's going to let me stay with you till the evening."

George's hesitation could be felt. Mary sprang to her feet and ran to him.

"George, you're a lamb, you really are."

George shook his head dubiously. "You're goin' to get me into a pot o' trouble, missy, you an' this young chap. Wot'll the boss say if 'e finds yer together?"

"You're not going back on your word, George?" The handkerchief reappeared.

"'Ave it your own way, missy," said George hurriedly. "I dessay it won't do no 'arm if 'e stays in 'ere for a hour or so. But when I says ''Op it,' slippy's the word."

He wandered forth, muttering over the softness of his heart and his susceptibility to the tears of feminine distress. As the lock shot home behind him, two woeful faces broke into smiles.

"There's no doubt," announced Bill, "we're both wasted in private life. Your tears were magnificent."

"They'll have to flow in rivers before we get out of this," was Mary's reply.

(3)

Mary told her story first; how the taxi, instead of taking her to the station, had suddenly swung off into one of the less frequented crescents of Bath; how, when she rose to protest, the benighted stranger who was taking a lift in the rain had produced a sponge reeking with chloroform; how, on recovering, she found herself in a strange, shuttered car; how she had been threatened with more chloroform if she uttered a word; and how, finally, the car had landed her in no less familiar a spot than her own Priory Farm. There she had stayed, in solitary confinement, for two days and nights. That morning she had heard the tramp of footsteps on the stone flags outside. This had evidently been the conveyance of Bill, insensible, to the adjoining room. A little later, Bukholin himself had paid her a visit.

"Directly I saw him," said Mary, "I knew who he must be."

"Pretty rough on you," commented Bill sympathetically.

"I was horribly frightened just at first," confessed Mary, "when I came to in the car. Afterwards, not so much. It's like that, when you've been dreading something for a long time and at last it happens."

"I know."

"Also, I was furiously angry."

"I don't wonder. What did Bukholin say?"

"He began by asking me if I had changed my mind and would give him what he wanted. I said sweetly, 'Nothing doing,' and was getting ready to tell him an awful lie about having sent it to the Bank."

Bill chuckled. "When really——?"

Mary tapped her jumper. "It's here. Of course, he'll probably want to search me——"

"Damn his eyes!" exclaimed Bill angrily. "Look here, Mary, you can't possibly——"

"Anyhow," Mary continued, "he didn't wait for my story; he just looked nasty and went off. What a man!"

"Poisonous," Bill agreed, and plunged into the record of his own adventures. "The idea was all right," he concluded, "and if only I hadn't been such a clumsy goat as to knock that book over, you'd be back at Havilden by this time."

"Never mind," said Mary sympathetically. "Do you think Jim will have picked up that message you dropped?"

"It's a chance. Brother Jim's not a born sleuth, you know, but he's a sticker. Of course I could only give him Wiltshire as the destination, and that's pretty vague."

Having agreed on the remoteness of the chance that Jim would track them to the Priory Farm, they re-examined their prison—its narrow slits of windows,

its four-foot walls, its too, too solid door. Bill shook his head. "My room's much the same," he remarked. "We could never break out, not, at least, without bringing George on the scene."

"It really looks," said Mary despondently, "as though George were our best hope. Bill, we must try some more blandishing."

They had their chance a few minutes later when George's square head once more appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, George," said Mary, "we want to talk to you."

By arrangement, Bill opened the debate.

"George," he said in his gravest voice, "this sort of thing simply won't do."

"Wot sort of thing?" inquired George.

"Do you suppose," demanded Bill in reply, "nothing's going to happen to you when the police get on your tracks?"

George scratched his head. "'Tain't my business," he replied cautiously. "And if it comes to that, 'ow's the perlice to know you're 'ere?"

"My dear George," said Bill, "use your brains. Are you proposing to murder us?"

"Lord love yer, no."

"Very well. Then, unless you mean to keep us here for the rest of our lives, one day you're going to let us out."

"That's right."

"And when that happy day arrives there's going to be such a hullabaloo and hue and cry that I wouldn't give a farthing for your chances of getting away."

"Yer think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Quite apart from the fact that the police are right on to the job now and may blow in at any moment."

"Well," said George, after a minute of perturbed meditation, "that's up to the boss, that is."

"Never mind the boss," urged Bill. "You can bet

your boots that when the trouble starts you won't see him for dust. You're the man who'll be for it."

"'E's treated me straight, so far," replied George uneasily, "though I can't say as I fancies 'im or 'is crowd overmuch."

"There you are!" exclaimed Bill triumphantly. "They're not your sort, George, and that's the truth. It beats me how you ever came to get in with them. Think what everyone will say when you're brought into court on a charge of abduction. 'How on earth did old George join up with a rotten pack like that?' That's what they'll say."

"Now shut yer mouth," said George crossly. "Wot's the bloomin' use o' talkin'? I does my work and draws my pay. A pun a day they give me, and a tenner when the job's finished. That's fair, that is."

"If the money's all that's worryin' you——" began Bill slowly.

"An' don't you start tryin' to corrupt me," said George excitedly. "I'm not one o' your double-crossin' chaps, an' don't you make no mistake."

Mary slipped in to cover a tactical error. "Of course not," she said. "We know you're not that sort of man at all, don't we, Bill?"

"Absolutely," Bill hastened to concur.

"What I can't understand," went on Mary, "is how a man like you can bring yourself to bully a defenceless girl."

"Now, missy," pleaded George, "don't go for to say that. If it 'ung on me you'd be walkin' outer 'ere this minnit and welcome."

"But it does hang on you, George," said Mary, fastening liquid eyes on him. "Only you can help us."

George writhed with embarrassment. "And wot about them blokes downstairs?" he inquired hoarsely "Think *they*'d let you walk out? Not them."

"But surely you're not *afraid* of them?"

"Not afraid; that is, not wot you'd call afraid. Uncomfortable, that's wot I feel when I thinks o'

them." He drew a little closer, with a cautious backward glance at the door. "That furrin chap fair gives me the creeps, missy."

"I'm with you there," agreed Bill. "But can't we slip out while he's otherwise engaged?"

George shook his head. "There's always one o' them below," he objected, "and they're armed. I seen the shapes of guns in their pockets. Dirty dogs!" His allegiance to his allies was visibly weakening.

"What about night-time?"

"Now give over," said George. "'Tain't no good, guv'nor. I'm sorry, but that's straight. There's two on 'em below and three in the 'ouse. I know 'em. Their sort shoots first and arsks questions afterwards."

"That is very interesting," said a soft voice from the door. George jumped six inches into the air and spun round with surprising agility. Bukholin had entered so quietly that even Bill and Mary were unaware of him until he spoke.

"Ow, you give me a turn," wheezed George. "I was just explaining to these 'ere"—he glared ferociously at his prisoners—"as 'ow it ain't no good them thinkin' they could 'op it. That's all I was doin', boss, straight it was."

Bukholin's eye travelled slowly from one to the other. "You talk too much," he said abruptly to George. "Get out!"

George got out with the sidelong shuffle of the dog who fears a boot on his hind quarters.

After his departure Bukholin surveyed his victims for a moment in silence. "Have you not in England," he inquired, "a saying that journeys end in lovers' meeting?"

"I suppose," remarked Bill wearily, "you can't help being a cad."

"Your code," replied Bukholin, "is strange to me. I make a little joke and you call me a 'cad.' How, then, do you describe a young man who listens to conversations through keyholes?"

"I daresay you think that's smart," said Bill. "I'm not going to bother to argue with you. Now that you've successfully kidnapped Miss Plinn and shanghaied me, perhaps you will kindly tell us what you propose to do next."

"That," said Bukholin, "depends upon Miss Plinn."

"Oh, get on with it," said Bill. "This isn't a first night at the Lyceum."

"As you will," replied Bukholin. "Though it is possible that when I have 'got on with it' you may be less pleased with yourself. I am waiting for Miss Plinn to give me something."

"Are you?" said Mary. "You know, Mr. Bukholin, if you aren't careful you'll become a bore." She sat back in her chair, looking disdainfully at him.

"That would be a pity," remarked Bukholin. "So you persist in your refusal?"

"You're getting quite quick and bright," said Mary.

"In that case I fear—I fear very much—that I shall have to try more drastic measures."

"If you lay a finger on her——" began Bill hotly.

Bukholin turned swiftly on him. "Who said that I would lay a finger on her?" he demanded. "I shall not—not one little finger. But on you, my excellent if too inquisitive young friend, on you—that is another matter."

"What do you mean?" demanded Mary.

Bukholin laughed. "Did you suppose," he inquired, "that I had brought this young man all this way simply that you might have the pleasure of his society?"

"Oh, get on with it," said Bill disgustedly. "What are you going to do?"

"To begin with," explained Bukholin, "always supposing Miss Plinn remains in the same mind, not much. But I have always wanted to know whether the loss of an ear would seriously affect a young man's sense of hearing."

"You—you mean that you'll cut off one of his

ears?" demanded Mary, incredulous but turning very white.

Bukholin nodded his head. "Only one—for a beginning," he said. "I cannot claim originality, but the old devices are often most effective."

"You wouldn't dare!" Mary flared up at him.

Bukholin turned towards the door. "So?" he said. "I have still to convince you that I am serious? So be it, you shall see——"

"No, no," cried Mary, darting swiftly between him and the door. "You're not to. I—I believe you, I do—really."

"And you will give me what I want?"

"I can't," said Mary, recovering the poise from which the prospect of an earless Bill had momentarily shaken her. "I—I haven't got it." If only the man would take his eyes off her. "I sent it to my Bank."

Bukholin raised his eyebrows the fraction of an inch.

"Your Bank?" he queried. "Yes, that is more difficult. But you can send for it."

"How?"

"You will write an order to your Bank to send it to an address I shall give you in Russia."

"I see. And what happens then?"

"When I am informed of its safe arrival I shall leave you. You will remain here—let us say—for twenty-four hours. At the end of that time your friends will receive a letter informing them of your whereabouts. They will find you—in an empty house."

"Splendid!" said Bill. "What a brain! You've thought of everything—almost."

Bukholin ignored him. "So you will write out that order?" he inquired.

"There's just one point that has escaped you," persisted Bill, "and it blows your putrid plan skyhigh. It's obvious you know nothing about our Bank managers. If Miss Plinn's is anything like mine, it will take a strong man and a corkscrew to get so much as a small overdraft out of him, let alone this thing-me-bob you're so worked up about."

"You mean," said Bukholin patiently, "that the Bank is unlikely to carry out Miss Plinn's order?"

"Not a hope," rejoined Bill jubilantly. "It's stalemate, my lad. You've got us and the Bank manager's got the boodle. Now what about it?"

Bukholin was obviously thinking hard. "I shall return," he announced, "at seven o'clock. I shall then satisfy myself that you are telling the truth, Miss Plinn, when you assure me that you have not this object with you. It occurs to me that it may be necessary to send some token to your friends"—he stared most unpleasantly at Bill, whose ears began to itch uncomfortably—"to persuade them to put the necessary pressure on your Bank. That is, assuming that you are speaking the truth."

He bowed jerkily and left the room.

(4)

As the lock of the heavy door grated into its socket, the two prisoners turned ruefully to each other.

"Bluff?" inquired Bill.

Mary shook her head. "No. Bill, unless something very jolly and unexpected happens before seven o'clock I shall have to give him what he wants."

"As I don't know what that is," said Bill, "I can't very well express an opinion on its importance as compared with my ears. I'm bound to say that just at the moment my ears have it, if you take my meaning. But I'll leave it to you, partner."

"My dear," said Mary, "you may think it funny, but I know no more than you do what this thing is. It's something sewn up inside a little leather bag—something hard and nobbly—and my father entrusted it to me to keep. It belongs to Fazz-ed-din."

"How much?"

"Fazz-ed-din; the man who was Prime Minister in Sogdiana. He was to come and claim it, but I don't know where he is. He may be dead."

"Well, it don't sound as if he was worrying much about it. If that's all there is to it——"

"I know," said Mary. "It's only that—that daddy trusted me with it, and I should feel as if I were—as if I were letting him down if I gave it up to Bukholin."

"There's also the point that we don't want Bukholin to score, if we can help it." Bill tugged thoughtfully at his sandy hair. "Point is, can we help it? If, when he comes back, you stick to the Bank story, I gather he'll insist on searching you."

"Shall I throw it away?" suggested Mary. "Through the window?"

"That won't stop his searching you. If you tell him you've thrown it away he'll soon find it. If you don't tell him, he'll assume your Bank story was true, and bang goes my ear."

"In fact," said Mary sadly, "it comes to this: when Bukholin returns I shall have to give him what he wants."

"Mary, I'm not making idiotic suggestions, but if you like to chuck the blessed thing through the window, and let him search you, and keep to the Bank story, I'll stick anything in reason to gain a few days' delay."

"Bill, don't! As if I could!"

"All right, it's as you please. Though I must say that the more I dally with the idea of caving in to the blighter the less I like it. And here's another snag: do you suppose he'll keep his promise and let us out when he's got what he came for?"

Mary shook her head unhappily.

"And if——" Bill continued.

The door opened and George, crestfallen and out of humour, lumbered in.

"Now then," he said, sulkily, "time's up, guv'nor. Come along."

"Oh, you're not taking him away?" exclaimed Mary.

"Yes, I am, and sharp's the word."

For a moment Bill considered resistance, and looked swiftly round for some weapon. But Mary guessed his thoughts.

"No," she said, "do go with him. It's—it's all right."

Bill went.

"Got me into trouble, you 'ave," grumbled George sourly, as he ushered Bill back to his room. "Too soft-'earted I am."

He slammed the door viciously behind him.

Bill sat down on his bed. By now the fumes of the drug had lifted like a morning mist, leaving nothing but a headache behind. Consequently, the unpleasant situation notwithstanding, Bill's spirits steadily rose. He looked at his watch. Five o'clock. Two hours to wait before Bukholin came back. He fumbled for his cigarette case and found another problem. He had just three cigarettes, and goodness only knew when he would get a fresh supply. Perhaps George would oblige; but the recent scene had shown that not much reliance could be placed on George—not, at least, when Bukholin was about. Anyhow, he would trust to luck and have one of his three cigarettes now.

As he sat and smoked, he cast an unhopeful eye around. There are generally two ways of quitting a room, by the door and by the window. He had had a look at the door as he went through in George's wake. It was of good solid oak, dubiously forceable, and only at the cost of bringing along the entire household to see what the noise was about. That was no good. Of course he might break a leg off the chair, and, when George paid his next visit, fell him with a sudden blow. But the chair was a gimcrack affair and it would take a pretty shrewd whack to stun an ox-like fellow like George; while outside he would have to pass at least one man armed with a revolver. Worth trying at a pinch, all the same. The more Bill thought about it, the less he relished

the prospect of a meek compliance with Bukholin's demands. Curse the fellow!

Then there were those absurd windows, tapering to mere eight-inch slits in a five-foot wall. True, it might be feasible to wriggle along the taper so that his face reached the opening and he could see outside. Worth trying, again. His cigarette finished, he attacked the window that seemed slightly the wider of the two. Painfully he squeezed himself along the narrowing passage till he was stretched at full length, his nose a few inches from the slit and his feet projecting into the room. Another heave brought him a little closer, though the walls now gripped his shoulders and he began to wonder if he would ever be able to get back. One more sideways wriggle, and he lay with his nose on the edge of the unglazed window.

He found himself looking out on to a little orchard of old fruit trees and unkempt grass. The trees were in full leaf and grew so close to the window as to limit his view to a few yards. That was all he got for his trouble, and he was about to begin his painful backward journey, when suddenly his body stiffened with excitement. He forced himself another agonising inch forward.

"Colin, you little devil!" he called in a low voice.

CHAPTER XI

TREASURE ISLAND

(1)

TURMOIL, which had long been hovering, settled on Havilden Hall on the morning after Jim's return. To begin with, Jim himself, as a result of his exhausting activities, slept long and late, and his absence created awkwardness at the breakfast-table. The twins, as often happened when it especially behoved them to efface themselves, were suddenly possessed with devils, burst into one of their hurricane quarrels, and in the lack of an elder brother were forcibly separated by a slightly embarrassed David. Mrs. Campion herself, after further mental confusion, was seized with devouring anxiety on behalf of Bill.

"I can't *think* what's happened to him," she lamented for the twentieth time. "It's most inconsiderate of him to stay on in London just now, supposing nothing dreadful has happened to him. Major Faversham, the twins aren't usually as tiresome as they are this morning; I think it's just that we are all upset. Peggy darling, do see what's the matter with Jim. I suppose he'll be the next to go off. It isn't like Bill to behave in this way. If only my sister Agatha weren't so funny about trunk calls, I'd ring her up. Oh, here *is* Jim. Jim, I can't *imagine* what's happened to Bill. . . ."

Jim, rather cross and sleepy, made his belated appearance. He allowed his mother to ramble on till he had equipped himself with eggs and bacon. Then, rashly, he began to explain about Bill. At least he

tried, and as, during the last forty-eight hours, he had been doing little else than explain about Bill, he ought to have been successful. In fact, he was not.

"I simply don't understand," protested his mother. "What was Bill doing in this bookshop at all?"

"You see, Park had broken his leg."

"Park? Oh, I remember; he was that nice policeman who helped you."

"No," said Jim impatiently. "That wasn't Park; that was Peake. And he wasn't nice and he didn't help me."

"How could he, dear," inquired Mrs. Campion, "when his leg was broken?"

"Not Peake's leg," cried Jim. "Park's. Oh, mother, let's drop it."

At last David came to his aid, and although his elucidations scarcely reassured Mrs. Campion, she was comforted by his offer to accompany her to Bath on a further visit to the Chief Constable. "We must get him to call in Scotland Yard," David said, "and in the meantime he should arrange to follow up your son's message and comb through this county."

The pair of them started at half-past nine, leaving a comparatively tranquil house behind them. Jim mooned restlessly about from room to room, repelling the periodical attempts of the twins to involve him in their morning amusements; while Peggy was foraging in Stavrock for victuals for the house-party.

(2)

As Colin observed to Micky, there are days when absolutely nothing goes right. This particular day, Micky at once added, was one of them. There had been that fracas at the breakfast-table, the subject of war-guilt being later mutually avoided as likely to lead to a renewal of hostilities. There was Jim, usually a fairly accommodating elder brother, but become

utterly impossible since his trip to London. (Invitations to a game of cricket now merely met with an insulting invitation to "run away and play.") There had been distinct possibilities about this Major Faversham, but he was too busy with Mrs. Campion to spare any attention to two small boys. Peggy, the last hope, was fussing about food and arrangements, and so, by a process of exclusion, the twins were thrown upon their own resources.

The limit of discontent was reached when an unfeeling elder brother evicted them summarily from the luncheon table, on the ridiculous pretext that the grown-ups wanted to talk. As if the twins were not madly desirous to be in on that talk! All sorts of excitements were in the air, and the twins were being shut out. Nobody seemed to understand that they simply must know what the Chief Constable had reported in Bath that morning, and what had later transpired between Major Faversham and the Chippenham police. Nobody seemed to realise that two young gentlemen who had made a catholic study of the literature of crime could hardly fail to help in solving an intricate problem in criminology.

It was no good. The twins were still masticating bananas when Jim turned on them with an "Out you get." And Jim, in the lamented absence of Bill, being the dominant male of the family, must be obeyed.

"It's sickening of him to turf us out like this," grumbled Micky, as he and his fellow-exile wandered disconsolately into the garden.

"I do wish Bill would come back," sighed Micky. "I expect he's dead; and Mary too."

With which cheerful conclusion they made for the cricket net on the lawn behind the house.

"I'm tired of cricket," asserted Colin suddenly, five minutes later, after he had bowled five wide long hops. "Let's play Treasure Island."

This, it should be explained, was the latest game, but, needless to say, it had already evolved into something

which its begetter, Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson, would scarcely have recognised. At the bottom of the hill, on the south bank of the Avon, the Campions owned a tiny boathouse, in which a battered and ancient punt swung on its moorings. This, of course, was the *Hispaniola*. The rating of the crew, involving the question of precedence, had been at first a delicate matter, but finally, by an amicable compromise, Colin became the Captain and Micky the Squire; this being without prejudice to subsequent impersonations by one or other of Long John Silver, Jim Davis, Ben Gunn and the like. Provided with ship and ship's company, the twins still lacked an island, not to mention a treasure; and the Avon, though in most respects a satisfactory river, was singularly deficient in both—at least along the Havilden reaches. There was, however, one point in its course where a very fair imitation of an island was to be found, and that was where it looped itself round the peninsula on which stood the Priory Farm. So, for a while, "Treasure Island" flourished, and was only just beginning to pall when it received a new and astonishing impetus. The vicinity of the Priory Farm had long been a recognised picnic-place and playground for the Campion family, no one, and least of all the landlords—the Plinns or their agent—objecting. One late May morning, however, when the game had reached the point when the treasure was about to be discovered under the middle apple tree of three, a blackbearded stranger had burst angrily from the farmhouse and chased the twins with threats to the water's edge. Thereupon the stranger, promptly christened Blackbeard after the famous Captain Teach, was incorporated (all unconsciously) in the game. In fact, it must be confessed that at this late stage in their careers "Captain Livesey" and "the Squire" themselves took to piracy. The scarred timbers of the *Hispaniola* were adorned with a skull and crossbones in fresh black and white paint, while a real Jolly Roger, manufactured by Peggy, braved the breezes from the

top of a broken punt-pole; and thus "Treasure Island" became a delicious territory, to be visited by stealth and to be quitted, as a rule, in breakneck haste.

So, on Colin's suggestion, stumps were drawn for the day, and the piratical pair dawdled off down the hill to the little boathouse, cast off the *Hispaniola's* moorings, and paddled up-stream. The punt was heavy, the current was strong, and the combined age of the crew was eighteen; so that nearly an hour had elapsed before the *Hispaniola* rounded the last bend, and the willow-fringed beach of "Treasure Island" hove in view.

"Bags I going ashore first," said Colin suddenly.

Micky abruptly stopped paddling, so that the head of the punt swung clumsily round and struck the bank. "Bags I," he echoed, without conviction.

"It's my turn," proclaimed Colin. "Look out, you fool, we're right in the reeds."

"Don't make such a noise," grumbled Micky; "Blackbeard 'll hear you."

Stealthily the *Hispaniola* drew in to the north bank. By arrangement the twins went ashore in turn, one of them always staying in the punt in case the enemy should attempt to cut off communications.

"Shiver my timbers," muttered Colin, as he clambered out of the punt and up the shelving beach, "if I don't stir up that lubberly son of a sea-cook!"

"Aye, aye, sir," responded Micky nautically, to the vanishing back view of his brother.

Operations on "Treasure Island" generally resolved themselves into an attempt to approach as near as possible to the Priory Farm without drawing the attention of the blackbearded artist or (when he was at his work of sketching the Abbey) of a certain retainer of formidable appearance who was also in residence. In this, competition was keen. On one occasion Colin had actually put a foot across the forbidden threshold; on another, Micky, greatly daring, had poked a head into the scullery window and been rewarded by the

sight of the retainer peeling potatoes. On this particular afternoon Colin was determined to outshine all previous exploits.

The established approach to the Farm was up a slope of lush, uncut grass, in the lee of a low hedge; through a gap into a little overgrown orchard; and on past the grey, ruinous priory and the ramshackle outbuildings to the more modern quarters in red brick that lay beyond.

Colin reached the orchard, and was creeping forward to the shelter of the priory wall, when someone, a few feet above his head, called him by name. Considerably startled, he looked up, to see the freckled nose of his eldest brother, wedged, as it were, in a narrow window slit above him.

"Bill!" he gasped.

"S'sh," said Bill. "Don't make a noise. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," whispered Colin, wriggling with excitement. "I say, has Blackbeard caught you?"

"That's the idea," said Bill. "Mary's here too."

"Golly!" muttered Colin. "We'll rescue you. I'll fetch Micky: he's in the punt."

"No," said Bill. "Now, look here, old chap, this is frightfully serious—no rotting. I want you to do just as I tell you."

"All right, Bill." Colin's young face stiffened with gravity.

"Push along home as fast as you can. Is Jim back? Good. Tell him we're here. He must ring up the Chippenham police and get them to send men down at once by car. There are five or six fellows here, armed; and unless the police reach us by seven o'clock they may be too late. So Jim is to beat up anyone he can find and surround the Farm at once. And look out for shooting. Now repeat that."

With a little prompting Colin was soon word perfect.

"Now scoot," commanded Bill; and Colin scooted.

(3)

Micky, left to his own devices aboard the *Hispaniola*, began to be bored. The punt lay in the shelter of a big hawthorn bush known as Dead Man's Cave, and, lolling back on the emaciated cushions, he watched the trail of a water-rat, as it swam from bank to bank, and idly wondered what adventures Colin was enjoying ashore.

A faint crackling in the bush above him suddenly drew his notice, and looking up, to his horror he saw a familiar black beard, like a bird's nest in the thick foliage.

"Ooh!" he exclaimed, and lunged desperately at the bank with his paddle. As the punt swung responsively outwards, Blackbeard dived forward to grab the mooring rope; missed it, nearly overbalanced, recovered, and caught it.

"Now, you——" he breathed triumphantly.

It was a moment for extreme measures, and Micky brought the paddle down sharply on that hostile hand. Blackbeard gave a howl of pain and let go the rope. The punt drifted clumsily into mid-stream and safety.

"Fifteen men on the Dead Man's chest" (sang Micky triumphantly),

"Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum."

"I'll have the skin off you for this, you little hooligan," bawled the angry man.

"Drink and the devil have done for the rest,
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum."

But Blackbeard, stamping impotently along the bank, had noticed something. There was only one boy in the punt, and previously there had always been a pair of trespassers.

He suddenly turned round and bellowed back to the Farm. "George," he shouted, "there's a——little devil hanging around somewhere. Come down and we'll find him and give him the leathering of his life."

This was not so good, thought Micky. He had meant to retire down-stream and, as soon as the coast was clear, return to pick up Colin, who, meanwhile, might be trusted to lie up somewhere out of Blackbeard's way. But if there was to be a search, he would be found.

From the Farm came an answering bellow. "Righto, guv'nor, I'm comin'." And then, urgently, "A-ah, yer limb, I see yer."

Micky, too, had caught through the trees a flashing glimpse of Colin pelting down the length of the hedge. What a fool, to rush in like that, straight into the enemy's arms! The invisible George was lumbering after him, and Blackbeard was waiting at the water's edge. Colin was for it, with a vengeance.

"Look out!" squealed Micky. "Blackbeard!"

The next moment Colin also saw that sinister figure between him and the safety of the river, while behind him crunched the heavy footsteps of his pursuer. Colin scarcely checked his stride. He feinted, dodged, brushed past Blackbeard's outstretched hand, and took the river with a flying dive. The next moment he was swimming like another water-rat for the punt, to which Micky, bobbing excitedly up and down, encouraged him with loud yelps.

George, in the meantime, had arrived sweating on the bank.

"Can you swim?" demanded Blackbeard.

"Na-ow. Nothin' doin', guv'nor."

Blackbeard cursed him, looked for a moment as though minded to follow Colin into the Avon, and thought better of it.

"If I catch you young devils round here again . . ." he shouted in futile fury.

"Fifteen men on the Dead Man's Chest," mocked Micky, dropping his paddle to wave the Jolly Roger. "Sing up, Colin."

"Shut up," growled his dripping twin. "Go on paddling, you ass. I've found 'em."

"Found who?"
"Bill and Mary."
"Rot."
"I have," insisted Colin.
"Bar rotting?"
"Swear it. On the Bible."
"O-oh, Colin," gasped Micky. "What a sell for the others!"

CHAPTER XII

RING OF RETURN

(1)

DAVID had brought little comfort back from Bath. "The police don't seem to have got anywhere," he explained, in gloomy confabulation with Jim. "Mary left the dentist at a quarter to four. Then she simply vanished."

"What's to be done?" inquired Jim.

"They've called in Scotland Yard. If they'd done it forty-eight hours earlier it would have been more to the point. Incidentally, on the way back I looked up the Chief Constable at Chippenham—Wingfield. Funnily enough, I found he was my old colonel. He's ordering a scour round Wiltshire, marking down new arrivals, strange faces, and so on. For the present I'm afraid that's all we can do."

"Peggy's got some yarn about a foreigner in Stavrock," remarked Jim. "What was it, Pegs?"

"Hollins, the baker, said something this morning about a man—a foreigner—coming into his shop and inquiring the way to the Abbey. That was all he knew. I looked up Buzzard and told him, and he started off very busily to find out all about the stranger; but I daresay there's nothing in it."

"If there is," said Jim, "I'll back Buzzard to miss it. I'll go down myself this evening and have a look round."

Tea was finished, Mrs. Campion had retired upstairs with a headache, and the others were sitting on in a depressed circle, when the door shot open and two

small boys flung themselves into the room. The leader was dripping wet, the second had contrived to absorb a fair share of his brother's dampness and mud, and both were almost speechless for lack of breath.

"Twins!" exclaimed Jim disgustedly. "I told you to keep out of this. Go off and change your things at once."

"We've found them," Colin was just able to gasp.

"Do you hear?" shouted Jim, ignoring his news. "Go!"

"But we've found them. Bill and Mary."

"What *do* you mean?" Jim rose to take action.

"We *have*. Treasure Island. Blackbeard's got 'em. Ow, Jim, let go!"

"It's true," screeched Micky.

"I suppose you two think you're being funny," growled Jim, who had the ear of a twin in either hand. "You're going upstairs like greased lightning, my sons."

"I'm *not* being funny," wailed Colin.

"No," said Jim, "you're being merely childish."

He swung open the door with his foot, propelling his young brothers through it. And then, to his surprise and Micky's horror, Colin burst into tears, an unusual performance for him.

"Oh, do listen to me, someone," he sobbed, crooking a desperate foot round the door.

"Half a moment," called David from the window seat. "Let's hear what the youngster has to say. Somehow I don't think he's trying a leg-pull."

"I'm not," wailed Colin.

"He's not," echoed Micky, himself, moved by his brother's example, now near to tears.

Jim abruptly relaxed his hold.

"Come along and tell me about it," said David, and Colin, whose breath was rapidly returning, brought a tear-stained face to his one friend in a doubting world.

"It's true," he said. "Micky an' I were playing 'Treasure Island.'"

"Their latest game," explained Peggy. "They go up the river in a punt and pretend to be pirates."

"We don't pretend," protested Micky indignantly. "We are."

"Shut up, Micky, an' let me tell," said Colin. "We paddled up to 'Treasure Island'——"

"Where the Priory Farm is," interpreted Peggy.

"An' I went ashore an' Micky stayed in the punt. An' suddenly I heard Bill calling me. An' then I saw him in a room in the old part, where the arrow-windows are." By now he had as tense an audience as he could wish for. "An' Bill said that he an' Mary were Blackbeard's prisoners——"

"Blackbeard?" inquired David.

"Fellow called Constantine," put in Jim. "Artist. Rented the Priory Farm from Mary for three months from May 1st."

"An'," continued Colin, "an' I was to come back at once an' tell Jim"—with a resentful glance at his elder brother—"an' tell Jim"—he took a deep breath before discharging the message he had been repeating to himself all the way home—"he's to ring up the police at Chippenham an' tell them to send men down at once by car. An' there's five or six men at the Farm, an' they're armed. An' if the police can't get there by seven o'clock it may be too late. An' we're to go and surround the Farm at once. An' look out for shooting. An' then Blackbeard chased me an' I jumped into the river an' we came back as quick as we could."

David was on his feet, watch in hand and not a doubt left that the story was true. "Good for you, Colin," he commended. "Where is this place?"

"About a mile by road," said Jim. "Sorry, Colin."

"Quarter-past six," remarked David. "We must hustle."

Confusion followed. David made for the telephone, Peggy for the little gun-room, while Jim sprinted to

the stables to bring up the car, and Micky was sent to collect an active under-gardener.

David, his telephoning over, returned to find Peggy coaxing a wildly excited little boy to his bed. "Wingfield is sending some men along in a fast car," he reported, "but he says it will take a little time to get them together, and we're to do what we can meanwhile to hold up Bukholin and Co., without running unnecessary risks."

"I've got two shot-guns for you," said Peggy, producing them, "and fifty cartridges. Colin darling, do come away now."

"Off with you!" ordered David. "You've done your bit, and a jolly good bit too."

Colin, in the unwonted rôle of hero, allowed himself to be led off, with chattering teeth but a heart swollen with pride, to bed and hot-water-bottles.

Jim, back with the Morris, found the others in the hall. "Curnick's just coming along," he announced. "That'll be three of us to go."

From without arose a fearsome noise, a clanking and a grinding and a roaring, as though a traction engine were forging up the drive. David took a rapid look outside and turned back with a spurt of laughter.

"Three—did you say?" he cried. "We're four—no, five—for, unless I've gone stark staring mad, here's that blessed woman Janet Gilchrist, with her antediluvian car and her Calvinistic chauffeur."

(2)

"Good gracious me!" said Janet, lowering herself stiffly from the hard-driven Renaud. "If that isn't you, David Faversham! Peggy, my dear, I'm dying for a cup of tea, but first of all I want to know what's happened to Mary."

David was shaking Janet's hand and Jim was pulling off a cape like a burnous which she always wore on her motor journeys.

"Janet," said David, "there's no time to explain now. Mary has been collared by Bukholin and is at a farm close by. We're just starting to fetch her out."

Janet plumped into a chair and pressed a hand to her brow.

"Say that again," she begged, and David did so.

"Peggy," she announced, "that tea can wait. I'm joining the party."

"Splendid! Have you got a weapon?"

"Huts, of course not. What should I be doing with a revolver in Wiltshire? But I'll take this," she added grimly, picking the stoutest stick out of a large collection.

"What about your man?"

"Rorison," called Janet in her matter-of-fact voice, "come here. We're off to get Miss Mary away from some cutthroat bodies, and I want you to come too."

"Verra guid," replied Rorison, without turning a hair, "I'll tak' a spanner to them."

"There," said Janet. "We're ready when you are, David."

David ran his eyes over the party. "Now listen," he said. "It's twenty minutes to seven, and for some reason we've got to reach this Farm and do something before the hour. But we mustn't blunder in. What's the lie of the land, Campion?"

"The Farm's on a kind of peninsula," explained Jim. "There's the river on three sides. On the fourth there are fields sloping up to the Havilden Woods. Here's the map."

David bent over it with poised finger.

"The Farm's just there," continued Jim, pointing. "There's a lane of sorts running past it. One end of it comes out at the bottom of Havilden Hill, the other joins another lane leading from the Chippenham road."

"You can get round that way?"

"Yes. It's a bit longer, of course. You go through Stavrock along the Chippenham road, take the first

turning to the right, and go right again after you've crossed the river. Rather over two miles."

"Good. Now, Janet, you and Rorison must bustle off and block that road. Take Curnick—he knows the way—and get as close to the Farm as you can without attracting attention. Then put the car across the lane and block it. Curnick and Rorison must come on to the Farm, on foot, of course, and look out for a chance to lend us a hand. Campion and I will go in the other car by the shorter road, block it also, and beat up the Farm. Remember, no rushing in. We want to keep the pot boiling till the police arrive. We'll give you seven minutes' start. Is that all clear?"

"Perfectly," said Janet. "Off with you, Rorison, and start the car."

She climbed back into the Renaud, followed bashfully by Curnick, who had also armed himself with a heavy stick. The Renaud groaned and roared, and rocketed off down the drive. It was already moving fast when a huddled pile of rugs and impedimenta in the interior came suddenly to life.

"Sakes," exclaimed Janet, "what's this?"

The face of Micky emerged. "Me too," he pleaded.

Janet gave a hoot of astonishment. "Well, we can't stop now to put you down," she said.

Back in the hall the others were waiting with what patience they could muster.

"What about me?" asked Peggy.

"Stay here," ordered David. "We must leave someone who knows what we're doing. In fact, you might get through to Chippenham again now and tell Wingfield our plans."

Peggy hid her disappointment and sped off to the telephone. The others waited on in the hall.

"Can't we start?" begged Jim, who was in a fever of impatience. "It's nearly ten to seven."

"Give 'em another three minutes. Your brother's message seems to indicate that Bukholin is proposing to leave at seven. If we scare him he'll bolt before his

time; and if the north end of the lane is open he'll get away along it."

The seconds dragged on like hours. David was biting his lips and driving his nails into the palms of his hands, while Jim fidgeted about the hall.

"Now then," said David quietly, and they went down the steps into the waiting car. Jim took the wheel, pressed the self-starter, flung in the gears, and was off with a spurt of gravel. At the bottom of the drive he swung the car round the corner at a reckless angle.

"Steady," David warned him. "We're still before our time, and there's no sense in taking risks."

(3)

Bill wriggled back into the room and brushed away the dust from his clothes. That had been a stroke of amazing luck. The question was, would young Colin do the trick? And the answer was, that probably he would. He was a sporting little chap with a convenient habit of blind obedience to the behests of his elder brother. As some confused shouting floated faintly up from the river, Bill felt a twinge of anxiety for the twins. But surely even Bukholin would not harm such children—supposing that he caught them; and that, Bill reflected with a reminiscent chuckle, was never an easy job. Then if the twins got away—Bill glanced at his watch. A quarter to six. It was downstream to Havilden, and if the twins put their backs into paddling, they should reach the boathouse before a quarter past six. Another ten minutes would bring them up to the house. Then it was up to Jim; and Jim, though in many ways a priceless fellow, was not exactly quick off the mark. He would do something, even, in the last resort, attack the Farm single-handed; which would probably merely involve him in the mess without doing much good. Still, the important fact

remained that in an hour's time the whereabouts of Bukholin's prison would no longer be a secret; thereafter release would be simply a question of time, the only doubtful points being whether Mary would first be forced to hand over her secret, which in Bill's opinion did not matter very much, whether Bukholin would succeed in slipping off, which mattered rather more, and whether Bill's ears would be allowed to remain intact, which, frankly, mattered most of all.

Of course, if Jim came effectively up to scratch before seven, he would clear the board, and that would be the happiest ending possible. But there were enough "ifs" about that to daunt even an optimist like Bill. There was the risk that Mary would hand over her blessed secret before he could warn her that help was at hand. Obviously, they must play to gain time, but how was he to let Mary know this? No use worrying, concluded Bill comfortably, and beguiled the remainder of his wait by trying to imagine the twins' progress. Now they were paddling past Skinner's Farm; now they were in the Abbey reaches; now they were passing under the Havilden bridge; they were in the boat-house; they were hurrying up the hill; they were home; they were telling their tale to Jim. After that, imagination became difficult, as it was impossible to say what Jim would do. Jump into the car and pelt down to Stavrock to collect some stout allies? Perhaps. A quarter to seven. Suppose Bukholin saw Mary alone, so that there was no chance of warning her. Suppose . . . oh, what was the good of worrying? Yet, as the minutes passed, the fear persisted, and the stump of George's boots in the passage came as a positive relief. Now which door was it to be? The footsteps came closer and the lock of his own door turned.

"You're wanted," said George gruffly.

"So are you, George," retorted Bill, his mercurial spirits leaping upwards as hope revived; "but not, I greatly fear, in the same quarter."

George growled like a dog whose bone is threatened. "I don't want none o' your lip," he muttered. "Got me into trouble enough already, you have."

"Nothing to the trouble you'll be in when the police arrive," Bill replied gaily.

"*Will* yer shut yer mouth?" inquired George. "Or 'ave I got to shut it for yer? Do you want '*im* to 'ear?" he added in a hoarse whisper, with an anxious glance at the open door.

"Now, George," said Bill as he followed him into the passage, "you mustn't let old man Bukholin get on your nerves. Why don't you land him one?"

"Shut *up*," commanded George in a frenzy of apprehension. "'E's got ears like a bloody cat," he whispered.

"It isn't his ears I'm worrying about," retorted the irrepressible Bill; "it's mine."

George pushed him hurriedly into Mary's room, closing the door carefully behind him for fear of further indiscretions.

"I don't want to treat yer rough," he said, more amiably, "but orders is orders."

"Don't apologise, George," said Bill, wondering how he could get the man out of the room. "You have our sympathy. We shall think tenderly of you when you're chipping jolly little stones on Dartmoor."

"Ah," said George, "don't you be too sure, guv'nor. I ain't in jug yet and you are; and that's a fact."

"How true!" commented Bill. Why wouldn't the fellow leave?

George came a little closer. "Take a tip from old George," he whispered huskily. "Speak to the boss fair, guv'nor, and you too, missy. Get out o' this, it ain't no place for yer. See?"

Bill turned to Mary. "L'aide vient à sept heures," he remarked with an atrocious accent.

Mary looked at him—first incredulously, then joyfully.

"Wot's that?" inquired George suspiciously.

"French for 'every cloud has a silver lining,'" replied Bill promptly. "You're our silver lining, George."

The door swung open to admit first Bukholin, and then Blackbeard, the sham artist.

"Hullo," said Bill cheerfully, "here we are again."

Bukholin glanced at him and then turned to Mary. "Well, Miss Plinn," he said, "do you still persist in telling me that what I want is at your Bank?"

"Now just one moment," put in Bill. "I've been thinking this over, and you know this sort of thing won't do. What I mean to say is, you can't go barging about Wiltshire kidnapping people and threatening to snick their ears off. It may be all right in your home town, wherever that may be, but in Stavrock it simply isn't done."

"Will you kindly be silent?" demanded Bukholin.

"Oh, all right," said Bill. "I thought you ought to know: that's all."

"That is my business."

"Well, they're my ears," argued Bill.

"Just for the moment," retorted Bukholin. "Whether they will be in five minutes' time is going to depend on Miss Plinn's answer."

"It's not fair," protested Mary, "to shut us up in separate rooms and expect us to decide. I—I want to consult with Mr. Campion privately."

"That is not possible. I must have your answer."

"I've told you. What you want is at my Bank."

"That is unfortunate—for Mr. Campion."

"But what has it got to do with him?"

"Exactly," burst out Bill. "That's what I want to know. Just because you happen to——"

Bukholin made a swift movement. Till then Mary had not seen that he carried a little switch in this hand. Now, suddenly and savagely, he slashed Bill across the face. Mary gave a little cry of horror. Bill reeled backwards, recovered, and with a gasp of anger sprang at Bukholin. Before he could reach him, Mary was

between the two men. She had seen Bukholin's revolver flash from his pocket, and she flung herself on Bill.

"Let me go, Mary," he said in a thick voice. A red-hot weal lay across his cheek and forehead, and all the fooling had dropped from him.

"No, Bill, you mustn't, you can't. He'll shoot. Look."

"Certainly, I will," said Bukholin smoothly. "Another time Mr. Campion will take a hint."

Bill backed against the wall, putting Mary gently to one side. "You . . . you . . ." he stammered.

"As you do not appear, even now, inclined to take me seriously," said Bukholin, "you force me to a further demonstration." He beckoned George forward from the door. "We will have the young man on the floor, George," he continued.

George stood irresolute in the middle of the room.

"You heard?" inquired Bukholin.

"Yes, boss," said George uncomfortably, and took a pace towards Bill.

"If you lay a finger on me . . ." Bill warned him.

"Now," pleaded George, "jes' take it easy and there won't be no damage."

"You seem to be afraid of him," sneered Bukholin.

"Afraid!" growled George. "Me! I'll show you."

He charged in like a bull. For a moment Bill put up a strenuous but unavailing resistance. He smote George on the nose, and went violently to the ground with a pair of bear-like arms round him.

"Just keep him there," said Bukholin. "Sebenin, are you ready? Miss Plinn, as an earnest of good faith the gentleman you know as Mr. Constantine will now remove *one* of Mr. Campion's ears."

Mary sprang forward. "No, no, no," she cried. "You can't do it: it's horrible." As Blackbeard produced a vicious, shining little razor and stropped it, very deliberately, on the sole of his boot, she made a last despairing appeal to George. "You can't let them."

George was looking very uneasy. "I say, boss," he said, "that's strong stuff, ain't it?"

Bukholin took no notice.

"Cut out knives; that's wot I say," urged George.

"I recommend you not to say it again," said Bukholin, and the inflexion in his voice was so nasty that the faint-hearted George was reduced to silence.

"You are ready?" inquired Bukholin of Blackbeard. Then——"

"No," said Mary. "I'll—I'll give you what you want."

Bill was wriggling desperately in George's hands. "Don't give the swine anything!" he shouted.

"I advise you to lie still," purred Bukholin. "That knife is sharp and we would not wish you to lose more than an ear."

Blackbeard was kneeling on the floor, bending forward. Mary clutched at his arm and felt her own caught in an agonising grip. "Don't let him do it," she cried. "I've said I'll give it you."

"One moment, Sebenin," said Bukholin. "We are getting on, Miss Plinn. So this object is not, after all, at your Bank? That is as I supposed."

Mary fumbled feverishly. Suddenly a tiny bag appeared, attached to a thin tape. Silently she handed it over.

"Thank you," said Bukholin. "You will, I am sure, pardon me if I satisfy myself that this is what I want." Taking the knife from Blackbeard, he deftly ripped open the wallet, then squeezed into his outstretched palm the biggest ruby Mary had ever set eyes on. It was the size of a cherry, and glowed as though lit with some interior fire. There was a gasp of astonishment from George as Bukholin held it up between finger and thumb. "Ah," said the Commissar, "you would have saved yourself—and me—much inconvenience, Miss Plinn, if——"

There was a thunderous rap on the door and the

head of a burly ruffian appeared. "Boss, you're wanted," he said. "Sharp."

Bukholin turned on him angrily. "I told you I was not to be interrupted."

"If you must have it," said the other man sulkily, "this bloody place is alive with people."

Bill's heart gave a great bound as Bukholin strode to the door.

"Come with me," he said to the others, "and lock that door behind you. We will finish with this presently."

As the door closed, Bill struggled to his feet.

"Phew!" he said, with a sigh of relief.

"Bill, it was dreadful," Mary whispered. "I thought he was going to . . . Bill, can you forgive me for letting you in for this?"

"Rubbish," said Bill. "Do you realise that quite probably we win the odd trick?"

"Tell me."

"I rather think that young brother Jim has come up to scratch. Listen." Close by, a revolver shot cracked.

"Bukholin's got what he wanted," said Mary ruefully.

"Never mind, we'll have it back from him," Bill assured her. "Curse him," he added, cautiously fingering the weal across his face.

Bang! Crash!

"That was a shot-gun," said Bill. "From our side too." He dived into an arrow-slit, wriggling frantically forward.

"Can you see anything?" inquired Mary.

"Not yet." A pause. "There's someone—Jim. No, it's not. Gone again."

Another desperate wriggle brought him close to the slit. "We're all right," he roared. "Stick to it, Jimmy." Mary thought she heard a distant answering yell. More shooting. A howl of pain from near by. A lull. And then the sound of footsteps in the corridor.

Mary tugged at Bill's ankles. "Quick," she said. "Someone's coming."

Bill had scrambled half-way back into the room when the door opened softly to reveal the head of George.

"I've unlocked yer," he whispered softly. "Wait awhile and then take your chance. I'm off." He disappeared without staying to receive thanks.

Bill completed his return journey. "Good for George!" he said. "I'm going to take a hand." He cast an eye round, snatched up a chair, crashed it to the floor and tore away a leg. Then he looked doubtfully at Mary. "What about you?" he asked.

"I shall be all right," she said. "But—what's that?"

Outside the firing had dwindled to an occasional shot, but a new noise was beginning. It was that of a car, moving off in bottom gear.

"They're quitting," Bill shouted. "Come on, Mary."

As they reached the door they heard the crescendo of an accelerating engine, the double-barrelled roar of a shot-gun, and a fusillade of revolver shots. They were in the passage when these sounds were lost in an almighty crash, followed by confused shouting.

"Keep close," Bill enjoined Mary. "Some of 'em may have stayed behind."

Some of them had. The passage ended in a big room, and Bill, entering, ran full tilt into Blackbeard. Without hesitating he brought the chair-leg down on the man's head. Blackbeard lurched and fell, the revolver which he carried flying off at an angle. Bill dashed past him into the room. By a big, empty fireplace sat the burly ruffian who had given the alarm, nursing a damaged leg with eloquent oaths. Bill let out a whoop and made for him. The man rose, his big, stupid face staring with astonishment, his hands fumbling for some weapon, and received the point of a chair-leg in the pit of his stomach. He gave a gurgle of agony and sat heavily on the floor.

"Come on," yelled Bill, and, without even looking to see if Mary was following, made for the half-open door leading into the yard. Here he collided heavily with Jim, caught that startled youth by the shoulders, shook him vigorously, spun him round and thumped him on the back.

"Bill!" gasped Jim. "I say, steady on. Where's Mary?"

"Here; no, dash it, where is she?" He turned at the same moment as a stranger, brown of face and carrying a shot-gun, ran up, the three of them diving back together into the room. By the fireplace stood Mary, with a levelled revolver. Blackbeard was sitting sulkily on the floor with raised hands, while at Mary's feet the burly fellow was still hiccoughing and groaning.

"Oh, David," she said, stepping forward. "At last you've come."

CHAPTER XIII

MAN-HUNT

(1)

THE flurry of explanations was cut short by David. "Stay here," he said to Jim, "with the revolver and these two wretched ruffians, either of whom you may shoot on the smallest provocation. You others, come along with me. Something's happened up the road, and I'm worried for Janet."

"The party here dashed off in a car," said Bill, "and there were sounds of the father and mother of a smash."

"Probably that was Janet," explained David, as they hurried off; "she was blocking the road with her 'bus." He broke into a run, Bill and Mary following hard at his heels.

A hundred yards from the Farm they rounded a corner in the little lane and came upon a crowded scene. The Renaud lay on its side, its back broken, and its body twisted into a *débris* of woodwork and steel. Also on its side, with two wheels in a ditch and its nose in the hedge, was a big Bentley, almost as shattered as the Renaud. Beyond the wreckage a third car, filled with police, had just pulled up and was unloading men in uniform, led by a grey-moustached fellow in tweeds, who hailed David as he appeared. Close to the Renaud, spanner in hand, stood Rorison, one complacent eye on the ruin of his car, the other upon as battered a collection of toughs as might be found in England. There were four of them, prone on the road. One was unconscious, a

second was groaning loudly, a third, with a deep gash across his forehead, had just had a warning tap on the head from Rorison's spanner, and the fourth—none other than George—was being cowed by Janet and her stick. In the background was Micky, dancing with excitement.

There was not a kick in the crowd of them. Directly the siege began to warm up, they had run the Bentley out, bundled into it, and bolted. Accelerating to get clear of the Farm, they had swung round a corner and charged straight into the Renaud, drawn up broadside on across the lane. Those of them who were able, a few minutes later, to sit up and take notice, found themselves terrorised by a taciturn chauffeur, a very angry lady, and a small boy. With the arrival of the police the game was palpably up.

Greetings followed; between Colonel Wingfield and David, whom he laughingly accused of starting a Frontier brawl in a peaceful village; between Janet and Mary; between Bill and George. ("Put in a word for me, guv'nor," whispered that disgruntled warrior. "I done wot I could for yer, an' I didn't mean no 'arm to missy." "The road to hell, my dear George," was Bill's ponderous reply, "is paved with good intentions. But I'll do what I can.")

"You've got the missing lady?" inquired Wingfield.

David pointed to Mary, who was still being vigorously pecked by Janet.

"Yes," he replied, but his eye was scanning the prisoners. "Bukholin!" he exclaimed. "He's not here."

"No," interposed one of the men on the ground with an oath. "The dirty swine. 'E quit while 'e could."

"I should have thought it was the other way round," commented David. "Colonel, our man's got away."

There was a cry from Micky, who had climbed the bank in order to obtain a better view of this most exciting scene, and whose sharp eyes had seen something.

"A man's just run into the trees," he called, pointing to the woods that climbed up Havilden Hill.

Wingfield acted quickly. He sent a man to relieve Jim and told off another to guard the prisoners in the lane. "Another police car will be here in half an hour," he explained, "and will cart these fellows to the lock-up. Good-bye." And he and three men were through the hedge and trotting up the hill towards the woods.

Mary left Janet and came across to David.

"*He's* got it," she said in a low voice.

"Bukholin? The *Khotash?*" inquired David.

"The ruby? Yes. I had to give it him."

"Well, I bet he won't have it long," replied David cheerfully. "Don't worry, Mary, it'll be all right."

Jim, arriving from the Farm, was at once told to take a detachment home in the Morris. "Janet, Mary, Micky," said David, "and—yes, Rorison; that will about fill you up. Your brother and I will—make our own way back, that is"—to Bill—"if you're up to it."

"Rather," said Bill, who had an inkling that more was in the wind; and sure enough, when the Morris had gone, David looked hard at him. "What about it?" he asked.

"As far as I'm concerned," said Bill, caressing the weal on his forehead, "it won't be quite the end of a perfect day till I've had a couple of quiet minutes with brother Bukholin."

"Agreed," said David. "I've got a little score to settle too, and I'd like to settle it this evening. What's the other side of those woods?"

"The main road from Chippenham to Devizes. It runs along the top of Havilden Hill."

"So, unless Wingfield and his fellows overhaul Bukholin first, he's bound to cross the road?"

"I should say so."

David's eyes travelled to the empty police car.

"It seems to me," he said slowly, "that someone

should be patrolling that road. Can you drive a Sunbeam?"

"Try me," grinned Bill.

"Then come on," said David, and made for the car.

The watching constable opened his mouth and cleared his throat.

"That's all right," David airily assured him. "Tell Colonel Wingfield that I've taken the car."

Bill had started her engine, put her in gear, and was backing her down the lane towards a gap before the constable could think of a suitable reply.

(2)

A quarter of an hour later the Sunbeam was cruising sedately along the main road from Chippenham to Devizes.

"We are now," said Bill, flicking a finger at the woods on his left, "just above the Priory Farm. The blighter might break cover anywhere about here."

"Right," replied David. "We'll patrol gently up and down and hope for the best. I'll keep a look-out."

The Sunbeam, slowed to a bare ten miles an hour, crept along on the flank of the woods. One or two other cars swept by; and among them Bill just noticed a big Vauxhall saloon. Its sole occupant was a stout gentleman, who was driving rapidly in the opposite direction to the Sunbeam.

A minute later Bill brought the police car to a standstill. "Better turn here," he suggested. "It's almost the end of our beat."

It took his unpractised hand a little time to bring the big car round and set her nose towards Devizes. They had covered scarcely a quarter of a mile of the return journey when they were brought up short, just after rounding a corner. In the middle of the road, with outstretched arms, stood a stout gentleman in an overcoat. He appeared to be exceedingly angry.

"Excuse me, sir," he spluttered, as the Sunbeam drew up beside him, "a monstrous—a most outrageous —thing has happened. Highway robbery. On the open road."

"What's the matter?" inquired David.

"Matter!" exploded the man. "The matter is that I was driving quietly along this road in my Vauxhall when an infernal fellow stepped out from the side, waved his arms and stopped me. Before I knew where I was he was holding a revolver at my nose. A *revolver*, if you please. Bundled me out of my car—my own car, mark you—jumped in and made off. A little rat of a foreigner too," he fumed.

"Get in," said David. "That's our man. We'll try to get your car back, sir. Stamp on the gas, my son."

Bill needed no encouragement, and the Sunbeam bounded forward like a greyhound in a race. The needle of the speedometer crept slowly up to fifty.

"My name's Pakenham," shouted the new-comer from the back seat. "The car's a Vauxhall saloon. Got three minutes' start on you."

"Where are we going?" asked David, as they tore recklessly through a little village of thatched roofs, scattering children and dogs and giving an absent-minded hen the escape of her life.

"Devizes," said Bill, his eye glued to the road ahead. "It's six or seven miles from here."

"Any side roads he might turn down?"

"Only lanes and such-like that lead nowhere in particular."

"So long as he doesn't know we're close behind him, he'll probably stick to the main road, and not tie himself up. What happens at Devizes?"

"Anything," replied Bill, bringing the pace up to sixty over a length of straight. "He might go north to Avebury, or take one of two roads on to Salisbury Plain."

"Then we must try to get a line on him in Devizes, or earlier."

It was Pakenham who next gave tongue. About a mile short of Devizes he bounded excitedly from his seat. "That's it," he yelled. "That's my Vauxhall." Two hundred yards ahead the tail of a big car had vanished round a corner.

"Good," said David. "I think we have him."

He spoke too soon. Less than a hundred yards separated the two cars when they reached the straggling beginnings of Devizes. It was the evening of market day, and the streets were full of people. The Vauxhall, now aware of pursuit, charged impetuously through them; the Sunbeam followed more circumspectly, and lost ground in consequence. The pursuit entered the square in the centre of the town just as the Vauxhall left it.

"He's going north," exclaimed Bill a moment later, "past Roundaway to Avebury. Shall we drop Pakenham and get him to warn the police there by telephone?"

David shook his head. "No time. Besides, I've a fancy to settle this matter ourselves."

They lost a little more ground getting clear of Devizes, but they picked up the tail of the Vauxhall again as they sped past the Barracks.

"Now," said David, "go at it."

Bill went at it; but try as he might he could only just keep his distance behind, and that only because he knew every turn of the road and the driver of the Vauxhall was a stranger. But of the two cars the first was clearly the faster.

Suddenly Mr. Pakenham, on the back seat, let out a loud guffaw and slapped his fat thigh. David, turning, asked him what the matter was."

"I've just remembered," chuckled Mr. Pakenham; "there was not much above a gallon of petrol in my tank. I meant to fill up in Devizes. He'll come to a stop soon."

"Let's hope our petrol doesn't give out first," commented David.

They were clear of houses, and on their left front loomed the shoulder of Roundaway Down. The fading daylight disclosed a bleak and desolate country, through which the grey road drove in long straight stretches. In a dip and rise they lost the Vauxhall for a moment, thundered over the crest and past a turning, Bill stopping the car almost in its length with a skid that nearly carried them into the ditch.

"Missed him," said David. "He's taken that side road. Don't turn; reverse."

Bill laboured, cursing, at his gears, running the Sunbeam backwards.

"Where does this lane go?" said David as they slid forward once more.

"Over the downs to Calne. Hullo. He's stopped."

A hundred yards down the lane they came on the Vauxhall. It was derelict.

"Turned down here when he found his juice was running out," remarked Bill, as he scrambled down. "He can't be far now."

The others tumbled out of the Sunbeam, Mr. Pakenham hurriedly stripping off his overcoat. Obviously he did not propose to let the matter rest with the recovery of his car.

Bill clambered up the high bank on the left of the lane. "Gone away!" he yelled. "There he is. Come on."

Two hundred and fifty yards off they could just descry a dark figure scurrying along a hedge and up the northern slope of Roundaway.

It was at this point that Mr. Pakenham suddenly bellowed, "Stop thief!" as though he were chasing a pickpocket in a London street.

David raised his gun to his shoulder, and lowered it. "Too far for a scatter-gun," he said. "Besides . . ."

They jumped down on to the short turf and doubled up a gentle slope in pursuit, David and Bill in front, with Mr. Pakenham, who soon began to puff and blow, a bad third. The daylight was failing fast,

though, looking west as they were, the country was silhouetted in the short afterglow. Bukholin was running like a hunted fox, a black shape bent nearly double and travelling unexpectedly fast over the grass. In the first few minutes David and Bill gained a meagre hundred yards on him, while Mr. Pakenham had dropped far behind. Up they climbed, panting; the last of the daylight dwindled, but a providential moon, like a great orange, took its place, and star after star flashed out in the summer sky. About half a mile ahead loomed a spur of down, its bareness broken by a single copse and a few scattered clumps of gorse.

David and Bill redoubled their efforts to catch their quarry, or head him off, before he could reach the shelter of the copse, but Bukholin was running with desperation and entered the little wood a hundred yards ahead of them.

"Stay here," commanded David, as he and Bill drew up at its edge. "I'll run round to the other side. When Pakenham arrives, tell him to watch the copse and shout if he sees the man breaking out. Then come through it to meet me. Be careful, because the fellow's probably still got his revolver. But he's cooked, and I doubt if he's got much fight left."

David slipped off, and presently the thud of plodding footsteps announced the arrival of Pakenham. He was in a sorry case, completely winded, with rivulets of perspiration pouring down his face. But he was undeniably game and, having no breath to speak, merely nodded when Bill explained the plan to him, and thankfully took up a position on some rising ground a little distance off.

The copse, on closer inspection, proved much smaller than, in the darkness, it had first appeared, being little more than a glorified thicket. Bill could distinctly hear the crackling of twigs as David entered it from the other side. Now it was up to him to move off, and, with little liking for his job, he took a couple of cautious steps into the blackness of the tangled under-

growth. In a moment he was groping and floundering forward, his face whipped by pliant twigs, his clothes catching and tearing on the brambles. It was almost as though the thicket were alive and resenting his intrusion; and above the crackling of dry wood beneath his feet he could hear other cracklings, as it seemed, all round him. Somewhere, in the inky blackness, was the quarry, waiting and lurking. It was like a gruesome travesty of a favourite game with the Havilden household, in which you entered a darkened room where someone was hiding to jump out on you. He had a sudden feeling of panic, an impulse to turn and run which he fought down by a desperate act of will. And then he jumped at the sound of a voice quite close to him.

"Put your hands up, Bukholin, and come out."

It was David.

Something got up, almost at Bill's elbow, with a crashing of undergrowth.

"Steady," said David in a warning voice; "and keep those hands up, or I'll shoot."

Bill stumbled out on to the open down, the other two following. Then he turned to inspect the prisoner, stepping into moonlight; and as he did so, Bill exclaimed in astonishment and dismay.

It was not Bukholin.

David made the same discovery a second later, the three of them standing, staring speechlessly at each other.

Bill saw a man of medium height, sallow of complexion, melancholy of face, with a back as straight as a poker. He was holding his hands above his head smiling gently as though at some private jest. Bill had not a notion who he was, and it was David who first found his tongue.

"Good-evening, Fazz-ed-din," he said.

(3)

David was still adjusting himself to this astounding development, when Mr. Pakenham, his breath partially restored, joined the group.

"Now, sir," he said truculently to the prisoner, "perhaps you'll be good enough to explain what the mischief you mean——"

"It seems to me," interrupted David, "there's a lot that will want explaining."

"The hell of a lot," murmured Bill.

Fazz-ed-din gave a little bow. "Would it not be best, Major Faversham," he suggested, "that we should return to the automobiles? I am, as you might say, fairly captured." There was the gleam of a smile as he turned with an air to Mr. Pakenham. "Permit me, sir, to offer you at once my profound apologies for the liberty I have taken with your property."

"That's all very well," growled Mr. Pakenham, not to be appeased by such magnificence. "You'll have to tell that to the police, my man. I never heard of such a thing."

"Let's get back, anyhow," put in David, still completely mystified.

"Certainly," said Fazz-ed-din. "And perhaps, Major Faversham, as we walk, these two gentlemen will permit me to have a little private conversation with you?"

The "two gentlemen" agreed; Bill, because he was by now so sleepy that he would have agreed to anything that seemed to promise a return home; Mr. Pakenham, because he was dimly aware that there was more to the business than the theft of his Vauxhall.

"Where is Bukholin?" was David's first, abrupt question.

"He is dead," replied Fazz-ed-din. "I killed him."

David was silent for a moment. "I hoped to do

that," he said slowly. "Will you tell me how it happened?"

"You have a right to know. You will recall that when we in Sogdiana feared the overthrow of our government, I persuaded Sir John to take charge of the *Khotash?*"

"Of course. And a few days later, when Miss Plinn left the city, Sir John entrusted it to her."

"So he told me. It was a dangerous trust, Major Faversham, for her, for me, for us all—but particularly for her. I came here to relieve her of it. I searched your little town yesterday and found much excitement because Miss Plinn had disappeared. That caused me alarm. And then, whom should I see outside the hotel but a man with a black beard whom I recognised as a follower of Bukholin's? I then know who is in the affair. I go after the man and find where he lives, and what I see persuades me that Miss Plinn too is in that house by the river. So I make plans."

"Why on earth didn't you tell the police?"

Fazz-ed-din shrugged his shoulders. "The police? I am a foreigner; I do not know your police. I see your gendarme and he has not the look of a man of intelligence. Also, I wanted the *Khotash.* If the police find it, how do I have it? Perhaps the Soviet claims it. Perhaps there are questions, writings in the newspapers. I do not understand these things; but one thing I know, that I have a reckoning with Bukholin."

"All right," agreed David. "I felt that too. Go on."

"So I make a plan to enter the house to-night. I hide myself in the forest above and watch, and presently other people—you and your friends—arrive, and there is fighting. You win, and I see Bukholin coming to escape towards the trees—towards me—with your gendarmes following. I wait for Bukholin, and when he enters the forest, running, then I am close to him." Fazz-ed-din paused. "I kill him—quickly—with the

knife, before he is able to use his pistol. I search him and find what I want—quickly, oh, very quickly. But your gendarmes are now close. I leave the body and run, and the gendarmes see me, and think that I am Bukholin, and call to me to stop. But now I wish to escape. Bukholin is dead; I have the ruby, and I do not know your ways. I reach a road, and as I descend, the gentleman's car appears. I stop it and force him to descend. I use Bukholin's pistol. I fear the gentleman is angry with me."

"Just a bit. But where did you learn to drive a Vauxhall?"

"Once I worked for a year in a garage. It was—what you call it?—bluff; I meant him no harm, but I wished to escape. Then I find I am followed. I drive on fast—anywhere—and presently my gasoline is exhausted." He spread out his hands with a familiar gesture. "You know the rest. Not until you spoke to me just now was I aware who was following me."

They walked on in silence, nearing the lane where the cars had been left.

"What," inquired Fazz-ed-din in a hesitating voice, "will you do?"

"I'll see you through," said David with decision. "The boy"—with a backward nod at Bill—"is all right, and we'll pacify the other fellow somehow."

A little later, for Mr. Pakenham's benefit, he was describing, with sleepy corroboration from Bill, the rounding up of a gang of international crooks. He began veraciously, and ended with a thin tale which just served. Fazz-ed-din, he explained, was a perfectly respectable person who was being pursued by the remnant of the gang. Hence his drastic action in holding up Mr. Pakenham's car. Afterwards, still believing that his enemies were after him, he had fled for his life. "His behaviour may seem strange to you and me——"

"It does," put in Mr. Pakenham.

"But you must remember that he's a foreigner."

"Ah," said Mr. Pakenham, "that accounts for a lot. Awful fellows for losing their heads, foreigners are. Well, what do you propose we should do with him?"

"I think," suggested David, "that if you can bring yourself to overlook the inconvenience to which you've been put, I should be inclined to let him go. After all, you've recovered your car."

"Thanks to you and this young fellow, I have," said Mr. Pakenham; "which reminds me I haven't thanked you properly."

"Don't mention it," murmured David.

"I can't say I quite see daylight through this yarn of yours," Mr. Pakenham went on. "For instance—well, never mind about that. If you say, 'Drop it,' I'll drop it."

"Thank you very much," said David.

"And perhaps you'll give me a lift back to Devizes. I'll come out and fetch the Vauxhall to-morrow morning."

Bill roused himself and drove them back, David sitting beside him and jogging him awake with an elbow in the ribs, while Mr. Pakenham snored peacefully in the back seat, his head on the shoulder of the late Dewan of Sogdiana.

CHAPTER XIV

"YOUR ENGLISH SUMMER'S DONE"

ON an August morning Janet's bedroom at Stavrock Abbey was littered with trunks and suit-cases, some closed and strapped, others bulging but open to receive some forgotten trifle; and among them Janet herself moved busily about, for she had refused to delegate to anybody the business of her packing.

As she wandered to and fro, her thoughts darted back over the events of the summer. In half an hour Rorison would be bringing the new Sunbeam to the door—a glittering monster which, for all its show, was not, Janet felt in her bones, to be compared with that ancient but trusty conveyance which had met a gallant death outside the Priory Farm. Rorison, if you please, had scarcely concealed his elation, and the Campions and Mary were frankly ribald over its demise; in fact, she (Janet) was its only mourner, if you excepted the insurance people. They—would you believe it?—had had the impudence to try to make out that its end was due to an act of God, in which category they apparently included most of the really unpleasant things that might happen. It had taken a personal visit to persuade them of theological error. Then, at the urgent entreaty of David and Bill, and with the approval of Rorison, she had bought herself a Sunbeam. There was a joke about that which she had not fathomed, because Bill had remarked cryptically, "It will catch most cars, if not a Vauxhall"; and David had rejoined, "That depends on the driver."

She had stayed three days in London when she went

up to recover her insurance and buy her Sunbeam. Bill and Jim had gone with her, summoned by the police in the matter of a certain Bloomsbury house in which a great store of stolen property had been found. They had had to go into Court, and Bill had given evidence, and when it was all over he and Jim had fallen upon the stupidest policeman she had ever set eyes on, and haled him off for a drink; leaving her, of course, to endure the dithering of their Aunt Aggie, who was quite the most scatterbrained body she knew. Except, possibly, her sister, Charlotte Campion, who even now had only the vaguest idea of what had been happening. It was fixed in the woman's mind that for some days a lot of people—and particularly Bill and Mary—had been " very funny and tiresome," and that if she, Mrs. Campion, had not kept very calm and been very sensible, and that nice dependable Major Faversham had not arrived in the nick of time, goodness only knew what might have happened. In Wiltshire, too, which was such a county for gossip. The creature! Janet knelt almost viciously on the lid of an overloaded trunk, and snapped to its fastenings.

Well, well, it had all come right in the end. That wretched Bukholin person was dead—and unregretted; his body had been found in the Priory Wood. And she had learnt from David that the slayer was no less a person than Fazz-ed-din, whom she just remembered meeting in Sogdiana. That was perhaps for the best. If David had killed the man there might have been an awkwardness with the police; whereas Fazz-ed-din had just disappeared, and no one was likely to see him again. Which also was for the best. Meanwhile the police were hunting high and low for some imaginary murderer, who, after disposing of his confederate, had made his escape. It served them right. To think that for three days they had scoured the country to find Mary, when all the time she was in one of her own farms, not a mile from her front door!

Really, the twins had earned the chief credit; cer-

tainly they had earned the bicycles which Janet, in a burst of grateful enthusiasm, had given them; and probably, by this time, they had earned quite innumerable bruises and cuts through falling off their new mounts. The twins were adorable. So, for that matter, was Bill, though it was a pity that he should lately have exhibited every symptom of falling in love with Mary. Still, he was very young and would recover. There were fifty good reasons against *that* match; the chief of them being that Janet herself had other plans.

Other plans. Other plans. She went to the window and looked out, to see, on the lawn below, a very gold head and a very dark head, close together and bending slightly forward as their owners walked and talked.

Other plans. It was coming, oh, it was coming. As surely as night followed day it was coming; and unless there was something very wrong with the sharpest pair of eyes in Wiltshire, Janet Gilchrist would have to be getting herself something special in the way of wedding raiment when she returned from the East in March.

Well, well, that was as it should be; what she wanted; what dear old Janplin in his heart had wanted and hoped for. Janplin. . . .

The long bonnet of her new Sunbeam suddenly and noiselessly appeared among the trees below.

Printed in Great Britain by Richard Clay & Sons, Limited,
bungay, suffolk.

KS-058-092

£1.00